Past, Present, and Future
What Mid-Century Modern Furniture Means Today

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ABSTRACT

During the 1980s, mid-century modern furniture was just beginning to be rediscovered. Its popularity increased slowly until, in the late 1990s, mid-century modern furniture experienced a remarkable revival—a revival that continues today. Evidence of the revival may be found in museum shows, interior design magazines, popular media, advertising, and the Internet. Increasing demand for vintage modern furniture has prompted manufacturers such as Herman Miller and Knoll to reissue several "modern classics." In the context of post-war America, modern furniture represented new materials, new technology, new prosperity, and so forth. The question this recent revival raises, then, is: What does vintage modern furniture mean today?

Literature from the fields of anthropology, cultural studies, media studies, fashion theory, and design history was reviewed to develop a framework for the questions asked during semi-structured interviews. Twenty-eight participants—collectors and dealers of mid-century modern furniture—were selected using purposive sampling. All of the interviews were recorded on videotape and transcribed. Responses were studied for patterns and then coded accordingly.

The results of the coding process revealed three distinct modes of appreciation that I have categorized as: *Aesthetic*, *Connoisseurship*, and *Comfort*. This typology illustrates some unexpected results. For example, collectors expressed two seemingly contradictory forms of connoisseurship for collectors of mid-century modern furniture: the importance of "the authentic," and their tendency to mix "the authentic" with other styles of furnishings. Also, the three modes of appreciation are not mutually exclusive, but overlap considerably. These findings suggest that mid-century modern furniture is layered with multiple meanings, some of which remain from its post-war origins, and others of a more contemporary nature. These layered meanings allow for and help to facilitate the continued recirculation and reappropriation of mid-century modern furniture.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my father, John Wolf. My dad grew up during the Great Depression, so he learned to save practically everything. He used to say, "You never know when you might need this." My own habit of "junking" started at an early age, so I've never been sure if it's genetic or something I was trained to do. It was by way of junking that I've been able to build my collection of mid-century modern furniture and decorative arts. And it was through my collecting that I stumbled upon the field of Industrial Design, and eventually graduate school. How could I have known all those years ago where my junking would lead me? Dad was right, of course: You never know...

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

1. The term mid-century modern is described in some detail in the next section.

During the 1980s, mid-century modern furniture[1] was becoming collectible (Hirst & Walker, 1984; Lacayo, 1989; Vining, 1985). Its popularity increased slowly until, in the late 1990s, mid-century modern furniture experienced a remarkable revival (Filler, 1996; Marin, 1998; McGuigan, 1999), a revival that continues today. Evidence of the revival may be found in museum shows, interior design magazines, popular media, advertising, and of course the Internet (and especially online auction site eBay). Increasing demand for vintage modern furniture has prompted manufacturers such as Herman Miller and Knoll to reissue several "modern classics." Within the context of post-war America, modern furniture represented new technology, new prosperity, and so forth, as noted by museum curator Mildred Friedman (2001):

> At war's end, Americans were euphoric in their hard-won victory... New materials and technologies—some developed to serve wartime needs—made possible an array of fresh products and led to the ubiquity of synthetics in today's world... American designers, free of the devastations of war that temporarily trapped their European counterparts, waded hip-deep into an ocean of needs and desires. (pp. 165-6)

The question this recent revival raises for designers (and others), then, is: What does mid-century modern furniture mean today? The aim of this thesis has been to analyze the various meanings ascribed to vintage modern furniture by those who valorize it (collectors, dealers, etc.). By understanding more clearly the reasons for collecting design icons of the past, contemporary designers might come to understand more clearly how and why value is ascribed to particular objects—and by whom.

Topics and Questions

This thesis has aimed to explore the following topics and questions:

Function
• How do owners of vintage modern furniture use their furniture?
• How does this usage differ (if at all) from usage of other "non-vintage" furniture?

Nostalgia
• What role (if any) does nostalgia play in the collecting of vintage modern furniture?

Recontextualization
• How do owners of vintage modern furniture view their furniture within the context of contemporary society and culture?
• Why do owners of vintage modern furniture prefer vintage examples of particular pieces over "equivalent" newly-produced pieces?

Cultural Authority
• What prompted owners of vintage modern furniture to begin collecting?
• How do owners present their vintage modern furniture to others?
• How do owners choose particular pieces for their homes?

Conceptual Framework

Based on the topics and questions, as well as a preliminary review of the literature, I developed the following conceptual framework (Figure 1). This

framework was then used to shape additional literature searches, structure the interview guide (see Appendix A), and guide the initial stages of the coding process.
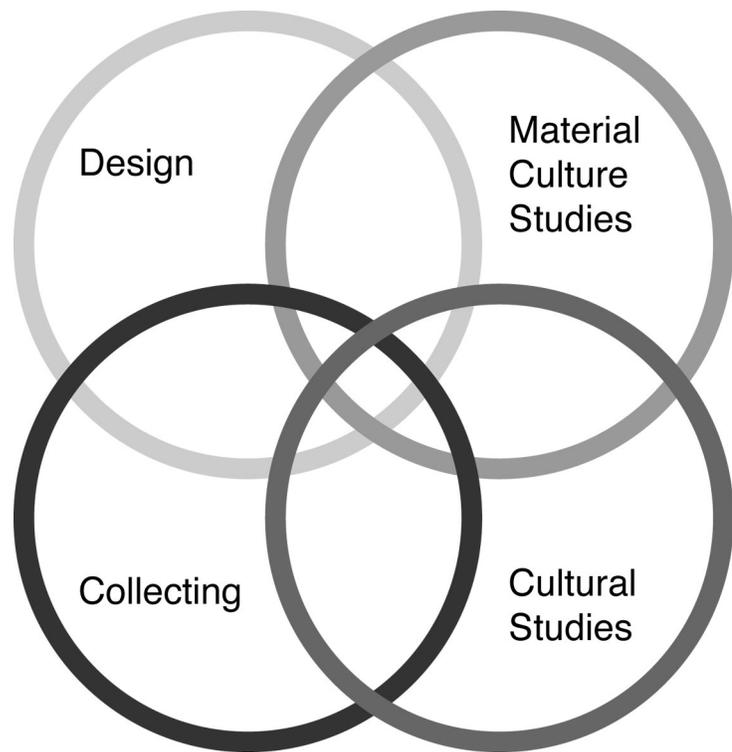

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Definitions

Three terms critical to this study were operationally defined before undertaking this research. It should be understood, however, that they haven proven—over the course of the study—to be somewhat incomplete. Nevertheless, it was important to "pose tentative qualitative definitions [to] use before... entry into the field setting to gather information" (Creswell, 2003, p. 144). Before presenting the operational definitions, it may be useful to discuss some of the background that led, ultimately, to these definitions.

Mid-Century Modern

The term *mid-century modern* is at the very center of the proposed research, making its definition critical to the study. A precise definition, however, is problematic, as Martin Eidelberg (1991) indicates in *Design 1935-1965: What Modern Was*:

> Modern design, in its simplest and most generic form, implies the up-to-date, a current trend, or, better still, a future trend. Many use Modern with a capital M to refer specifically to the period between the early 1920s and the outbreak of World War II: the heroic age of Le Corbusier and L'Esprit Nouveau, the age of Walter Gropius and the Bauhaus. It was the time when the guiding principles of twentieth-century industrial design were to be forged, the time when an idealistic generation sought to clarify and purify design, to create a language of rational, eternal form. Others might argue that Modern design, even with the capital M, also encompassed the decade and a half after the war, an equally heroic age of artists like Charles and Ray Eames, Eero Saarinen, and Tapio Wirkkala... From the vantage point of

the 1990s, the nomenclature and chronology of Modernism take on a certain irony. Can events of three quarters of a century or even half a century ago still be termed *modern*? *Ars longa, vita brevis*, but can we term designers modern when they have been dead for several decades? (p. 10)

Indeed, literature from the mid-century era contains a strong sense of modern as the "up-to-date." In 1950 Edgar Kaufmann, Jr. (1950) wrote in the Museums of Modern Art's *Introductions to Modern Design* that "modern design is made to suit our own special needs and our own spirit" (p. 7). Furniture designer George Nelson (1949) emphasized the contemporary nature of modern design as well:

> Surrounded as [the modern designer] is by a modern world that has no visible relation to the atmosphere in which the Windsor chair was created, much as he may admire the latter, he feels compelled to produce shapes that fit appropriately into his world. And his world, lest we forget, includes radar, Waring mixers, rocket propulsion, ball point pens, Picasso, and that well-known formula $E = Mc^2$. (p. 77)

Given the difficulties in defining precisely "what modern was," one might be tempted to instead focus on the *style* of mid-century modern. However, as Eidelberg (1991) points out, defining the style of mid-century modern no easy matter:

> It is not easy to define postwar style, for there were a number of concurrent tendencies... The postwar period saw the juxtaposition of opposites, of some designers working in curvilinear and others in a rectilinear mode, some avant-garde and others conservative or retrospective. (pp. 151-2)

George Nelson (1949) wrote of these "concurrent tendencies" in a 1949 article for *Interiors*: "There has probably never been a period in the history of furniture when there was so much variety in design, when so many kinds of shapes, materials, and techniques were being explored" (p. 78). In *Mid-Century Modern*, Cara Greenberg (1995) describes "furniture of the 1950s" as having "curves that were swoopy, parabolic, amoeboid; lines that were long and low; ornament that was absent; materials that, until recently, had been found only in aircraft factories" (p. 14). Unfortunately, these descriptions do little to operationally define mid-century modern for the purposes of the research proposed here.

One approach to this apparent dilemma might be to borrow from Justice Potter Stewart's attempt to explain "hard-core" pornography, or what is obscene: "I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced . . . [b]ut I know it when I see it..." ("Jacobellis v. Ohio," 1964). Indeed, I adopted a similar approach, and developed a rather flexible operational definition of mid-century modern, using two key pieces of literature,[2] as guides. Essentially, furniture that was identical to—or similar to—the furniture shown in these two books was considered mid-century modern. Additional consideration was given to production dates and knockoffs, as described in Chapter 4. This description was further shaped as result of the specific site chosen to do the majority of interviews for this study (as described in Chapter 3). This approach, of course, is still not without limitations, as noted below.

Vintage

The term *vintage*, too, is difficult to define in terms of this research. Vintage was originally used to refer to wine grapes, but has since taken on more generalized meanings. Webster's Third New International Dictionary

2. Mid-Century Modern and Design 1935-1965: What Modern Was were selected primarily for reasons of access (as I own and am familiar with both books).

defines vintage as being "of old, recognized, and enduring interest, importance or quality," making clear that vintage is not the same as *old*. Whereas old furniture may or may not be seen as valuable, vintage furniture is generally seen as having some additional value precisely because of its age.

Collectors of mid-century modern furniture often prefer vintage examples, as opposed to contemporary examples of the same design.[3] However, the term *vintage* is used quite loosely among collectors and dealers. For the purposes of this research, the term has been understood to refer to pieces of furniture from the 1950s and 1960s (which corresponds closely to the period described in the two key sources described previously).

Collectors

Finally, there is some dispute as to whether some of the participants[4] are actually collectors at all. The definition of collecting is problematic as it relates to the acquisition, display, and *use* of mid-century modern furniture. Russell Belk's (1995b) definition, for example, states that collected objects are "removed from ordinary use" (p. 67), which is not generally the case for collected furniture. Marjorie Akin (1996), however, offers a somewhat more liberal view, one that proved useful for this research: "There is often no strict division between an item that is "in use" and an item that is collected" (p. 103). For the purposes of this research, then, it has been assumed that participants who own several pieces of mid-century modern furniture are, in fact, both collectors—and *users*—of mid-century modern furniture.[5]

Delimitations and Limitations

This research has employed a relatively small sample size of participants. Also, the majority of participants were interviewed at a particular site (Palm Springs Consignment, located in Palm Springs, CA) at a particular time (during the weekend of the Palm Springs Modernism show).

The purposive sampling employed for this study may skew the results somewhat. For example, shoppers at Palm Springs Consignment and attendees of the show may not represent "typical" owners / collectors of mid-century modern furniture, but rather the more serious (and affluent) members of the greater community. The results of this research, therefore, must be considered in this context, and not generalized. Still, despite these obvious shortcomings, the participants are considered to be—in my estimation—representative of the larger community of mid-century modern furniture collectors and dealers.[6] Furthermore, even if the participants do not represent the greater community of mid-century modern buyers, they are nevertheless partly responsible for the current revival. For that reason, their opinions and insights are worthy of consideration here.

Potential Contributions

The objective of the proposed research has been to understand the meaning of mid-century modern furniture and the reasons for its valorization— directly through the eyes of those who valorize it. All too often, designed objects are studied from perspectives that exclude or marginalize the voices of those who lend authority and value to these objects. Indeed, this research would seem to the first of its kind—at least as it relates to the mid-century modern revival. By applying ethnographic research methods, then, this research has allowed these voices to be heard.

Anthropology and cultural studies scholars routinely study household objects and objects that are reappropriated. Designers—despite the fact that

3. For example, many of the chairs designed by Charles and Ray Eames have been in continuous production since they were originally designed in the 1940s and 1950s. Despite only slight changes to the actual materials or manufacturing techniques over the years, however, collectors generally ascribe greater value to the older (i.e., vintage) pieces.

4. Participants included dealers and collectors of mid-century modern design, as well as interior designers and one movie set designer who specialize in mid-century modern. Detailed descriptions are included in Chapter 3.

5. Some participants do not consider themselves collectors, however, as described in Chapter 4.

6. As a member of an online mid-century modern discussion group (http://groups.yahoo.com/group/midcenturymodern/) for nearly five years now, I am in a position to be able to compare individual behaviors and local trends with the broader (online) community of mid-century modern collectors. This is not to say that the online community is representative of all collectors either, only that it may be another useful point of reference.

they are regularly involved in the conception and production of these same objects—rarely study their various meanings. However, this is changing. As designers are asked increasingly to design *experiences* rather than products and services, they are increasingly turning to other disciplines (e.g., anthropology) in order to expand their "toolboxes." I hope this study will help to demonstrate the importance of such research in expanding the designer's toolbox.

And finally, although the objects studied are important to design history, I hope that the results of the research will be beneficial to Design's future. By understanding some of the reasons for collecting design icons of the past, contemporary designers might come to understand more clearly how and why value is ascribed to particular products—and by whom.

CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

As John Creswell (2003) points out, the use of a literature review in qualitative research differs from its use in quantitative research. Qualitative studies are based on the assumption that the participants are the primary source of information. Therefore, the literature should be used for "setting the stage," not for "prescribing the questions that need to be answered from the researcher's standpoint" (Creswell, 2003, p. 30). The literature introduced here should be seen in this context, serving as an "orienting framework" for the proposed research study (Creswell, 2003, p. 30).

The orienting framework suggested by Creswell is critical to this literature review. Little is to be found in the literature that addresses directly the mid-century modern revival from a design perspective. Indeed, a review of the relevant literature leads not toward the topic at hand, but rather in several different—but related—directions. Fortunately, related topics such as nostalgia and "retro" have been studied extensively, from the various perspectives of design history, fashion, material culture studies, cultural studies, media studies, and so forth. The literature reviewed here covers the topics of design history (the mid-century modern revival and the original meaning of modern furniture), fashion (retro fashion and fashion revivalism), material culture studies (the collecting of objects, the importance of household objects, and the study of second-hand objects), cultural studies (the role of nostalgia and the role of cultural authority in the current "retro" revival), and media studies (how nostalgia and "retro" are used in popular media). And finally, the subject of "retro" will be studied within the contemporary design discourse.

The Mid-Century Modern Revival

During the 1980s, mid-century modern furniture was beginning to be seen as collectible (Hirst & Walker, 1984; Lacayo, 1989; Vining, 1985). Its popularity increased slowly until, in the late 1990s, mid-century modern furniture experienced a remarkable revival (Filler, 1996; Marin, 1998; McGuigan, 1999). Cara Greenberg (1995), in her second edition of *Mid-Century Modern*, describes the revival this way: "Furniture from the '50s has been 'resurging' for at least fifteen years now—and it shows no signs of abating." Jim Collins (1995) uses the term *Retro-Modernism* to describe the recent revival of mid-century modern design (including, but not limited to, furniture). As evidence of the revival, Collins (1995) cites "museum shows, interior design magazines, academic journals and architectural debates" (p. 158). And indeed, there is evidence to be found in these locations. Several museum exhibits were used to showcase mid-century modern design in the late 1990s, most notably *Great Design: 100 Masterpieces from the Vitra Design Museum* and *The Work of Charles and Ray Eames: A Legacy of Invention* (McGuigan, 1999). More recently, *Vital Forms: American Innovation in Art and Design, 1940-1960*, began its tour of the U.S. (Rapaport & Stayton, 2001). In addition to its exposure in museum exhibits and interior design magazines (Filler, 1996; Henderson, 1994; Lacayo, 1989; Vining, 1985; Webb, 1999), evidence of the mid-century modern revival could also be found in more mainstream publications, such as *Newsweek* (Marin, 1998; McGuigan, 1999), *Smithsonian* (Stewart, 1999) and *The New York Times* (Hamilton, 2003; Johnson, 2003).

In response to the demand for vintage modern furniture, manufacturers such as Herman Miller and Knoll have reissued several "modern classics" in recent years (Cameron, 2002; Henderson, 1994). In addition to properly licensed reissues and reproductions, a number of knockoffs have also been produced (Greene, 2003; Hogrefe, 2000). Home furnishings retailer Crate and Barrel, designer Ralph Lauren, and many others have tried to cash in on the mid-century modern revival as well (Collins, 1995).

What Modern Was

To understand and appreciate the revival of mid-century modern furniture, it may be useful to first understand something of its original context. According to Greenberg (1995), the American public had been offered modern furniture as early as the 1930s, but it wasn't until the early 1950s that they embraced it. Beginning in the 1950s, they purchased it "with the hard cash of postwar prosperity, driven by a sudden, voracious hunger for curves that were swoopy, parabolic, amoeboid; lines that were long and low; ornament that was absent; materials that, until recently, had been found only in aircraft factories" (Greenberg, 1995, p. 14). If the public embraced modern furniture, it was due at least in part to museum exhibits promoting modern furniture (Eidelberg, 1991; Friedman, 2001). In *Design 1935-1965: What Modern Was*, editor Martin Eidelberg (1991) writes:

> The principles promulgated by the leaders of [modern] design some twenty years earlier—acknowledgement of technology, mass production, reductivism of elements, absence of ornament—were still being enunciated, perhaps with even greater force. And they became institutionalized. The Museum of Modern Art kept the sacred flame burning, especially at its "Good Design" shows, which designated meritorious products at the Chicago Merchandise Mart. Other museums, including the Walker Art Institute, Minneapolis, and the Detroit Institute of Arts, took up the crusade as well. (p. 151)

As a result of these museum exhibits, "the terms *Design* and *Good Design* became part of a new international language" (Eidelberg, 1991, p. 151). Museums not only exhibited modern furniture, they published books and exhibit catalogs to help explain its importance to the public. In 1950, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) published *What Is Modern Design?* In it, Edgar Kaufmann, Jr. argues that some of the best modern design was to be found in home furnishings. For Kaufmann, modern design was more than merely a style or trend. According to Kaufmann (1950),

> Modern life demands modern design. Not because it is cheaper to acquire or less work for housekeepers than "period styles" (though sometimes these advantages are found), but because modern design is made to suit our own special needs and expresses our own spirit. (p. 7)

When Kaufmann speaks of "our own special needs" and "our own spirit," he emphasizes the temporal nature of modern design. Kaufmann (1950) reiterates the point by noting that, "designs made now in mimicry of past periods or remote ways of life... cannot be considered as anything more than embarrassing indications of a lack of faith in our own values" (p. 7). More than forty years later, Eidelberg (1991) comments on the temporal nature of modern design when he refers to its revival as ironic.

> From the vantage point of the 1990s, the nomenclature and chronology of Modernism take on a certain irony. Can events of three quarters of a century or even half a century ago still be termed *modern*? *Ars longa, vita brevis*, but can we term designers modern when they have been dead for several decades? (p. 10)

These commentaries raise questions about the mid-century modern revival. *Can* furniture that was considered modern fifty or more years ago be called modern today? And if Kaufmann is right about the temporal nature of modern design, then one might ask if the mid-century modern revival reflects "a lack of faith in our own values"? These are precisely the sorts of questions that this research has attempted to answer.

Collecting

Collecting is a common activity in the U.S., and around the world. According to Michael Schiffer, it is estimated that there are "nearly two-thirds of American households with one or more collectors" (cited in Belk, 1995a). And, collecting is an important aspect of the mid-century modern revival (Frauenfelder, 1999; Hamilton, 2003; Johnson, 2003; Mason, 1999). A 1999 article for *Interiors* stated simply, "museums and collectors are snapping up the best examples of mid-century modern" (Webb, 1999, p. 64).

Collecting has long been an area of special interest within material culture studies, as Marjorie Akin (1996) makes clear:

> No study of material culture, past or present, can be called complete without examining how and why private collectors have amassed the objects of their desire, how they have kept them, and how the collections were subsequently broken up, reformed, and circulated through societies. (p. 102)

However, the definition of collecting is somewhat problematic as it relates to the acquisition, display, and *use* of vintage modern furniture. Russell Belk's definition, for example, raises questions about the function of collected objects. According to Belk (1995b), "collecting is the process of actively, selectively, and passionately acquiring and possessing things *removed from ordinary use* [italics added] and perceived as part of a set of non-identical objects or experiences" (p. 67). Akin, however, proposes that, "there is often no strict division between an item that is 'in use' and an item that is collected. The way a person views and uses an object can, and does, change from time to time" (Akin, 1996, p. 103). Based on my own experience, it seems that collectors of mid-century modern furniture—in general—use their furniture *as furniture* (although perhaps with greater care). Or, to use Akin's terms, the furniture is both "in use" and "collected."

Ethnologist Bjarne Rogan's study of collectors and collecting echoes the work of Belk. Rogan (1996) argues that "an object is collected precisely because it is useless," (p. 78) that the collected object's only function is to be possessed. However, what Rogan considers useless is worthy of further consideration. Rogan (1996) uses the term *useless* to refer to the "aesthetic or symbolic" (p. 78) qualities of collected objects. This perspective raises questions about the function of collected objects. In Schiffer's studies of "reuse," he suggests that "when things no longer serve the purpose for which they were created, they are sometimes transferred into the realm of collected material," the object's function shifting "from technofunction to socio- or ideofunction" (as cited in Akin, 1996, p. 103). In other words, the use of a collected object does change, although its form does not. This seems to contradict Rogan's claim that collected objects are useless, but this contradiction might be resolved by looking more closely at the function of objects in general. Here, Beth Preston's ideas about form and function may be of assistance. Preston (2000) proposes that Schiffer's content-specific classifications of function be combined with two structural classifications borrowed from Larry Wright and Robert Cummins. Preston explains here proposal using, as an example, a chair:

> A technofunction, sociofunction or ideofunction may be either a proper function or a system function. For example, although chairs have the *proper* technofunction of supporting seated humans, they routinely have the *system* technofunction of supporting standing humans who need to change a light bulb or get something off a high shelf. Chairs are not reproduced for this purpose, but they regularly serve it. Similarly, an expensive luxury chair with a *proper* sociofunction of manifesting its owner's economic status may subsequently be acquired by a collector. It thereby acquires the *system* sociofunction of manifesting its new owner's social status as a connoisseur—someone who is not merely wealthy, but who understands which things have historical or artistic worth. And ideofunctions, too, may be either proper or system functions. For example, thrones are usually a special kind of chair, reproduced in order to represent authority, which is thus one of their proper functions. But it might easily happen in some culture that a perfectly ordinary chair reproduced only in order to serve its basic technofunction might, as a matter of sheer historical fact, come to be the hereditary throne of the rulers. (p. 30)

In this example, Preston assumes that the collectable chair is an expensive one, one that serves primarily an ideofunction. However, the mid-century modern revival has transformed many examples of low-cost furniture into "things [that] have historical or artistic worth." Preston (2000) describes this as "losing or acquiring functions":

> This transition from system to proper function is typical of sociofunctions and ideofunctions, since styles of dress, jewellery, insignia, styles of home furnishing, and so on, when adopted by a few influential individuals tend to spread through the whole social group ... this multiplicity of functions is dynamic in the sense that things are constantly losing or acquiring functions. (p. 31)

If Preston's work is applied to Belk's definition of collecting, then it seems that collected objects can indeed be "taken out of ordinary use" or considered "useless." This doesn't mean that these objects have no function, only that the function has changed once the object is collected. This, then, brings us back to Akin's definition of collecting, in which she states that "an object can, and does, change from time to time" (Akin, 1996, p. 103).

Collecting is sometimes referred to as "passionate possession" or described as an addiction (Akin, 1996; Belk, 1995a, 1995b; Rogan, 1996). Belk (1995a) studied the effects of collecting on individuals and households. He interviewed and observed 200 collectors, and concluded that collecting often has a negative financial and psychological on both the collector and his or her household. Belk (1995a) also points out some of the benefits of collecting, among them, "connoisseurship, preservationism, scholarship, daring, perseverance, and judgment that rehearses or parallels traits we generally value in careers and in Western culture generally" (p. 487). He goes on to argue that "collecting reiterates and exemplifies the values we hold dear as a consumer culture" (Belk, 1995a, p. 487). However, according to Belk, the benefits of collecting do not generally extend beyond the collector. Indeed, Belk reports that the more the collector benefits from his or her collection, the more likely he or she is to develop interpersonal problems with others in the household. Although Belk (1995a) recognizes that "society generally regards collecting as less self-indulgent and frivolous that other forms of luxury consumption (p. 487)," he emphasizes its darker side. For Belk (1995a), "there is little difference between spending money on a collection and spending it on gambling or drugs." (p. 487)

Rogan (1996), too, uses interviews with collectors as the foundation of his research, however his interest is in the "symbols... that compare collecting to

love and eroticism" (p. 65). He begins with the theme of "passion and eroticism," and then presents its "four phases: (1) Passion and desire, (2) Hunt and conquest, (3) Eroticism and power, and (4) Loss of control and transgression" (Rogan, 1996, p. 68). Rogan then uses literary fiction to illustrate the symbolism found in his interviews. Rogan (1996) calls collecting an "ambiguous activity" because collectors often violate cultural norms by behaving similarly toward "what is animate and what is inanimate" (p. 78). The reason collectors (both real and fictional) are often the focus of attention, according to Rogan, is "because the collector openly defies society's ideology and norms (but not its mentality) through his materialism" (Rogan, 1996, p. 78). Although both Belk (1995a) and Rogan (1996) describe extreme behavior in some collectors, both authors recognize collecting as a form of consumerism. For Belk, this is why collectors are not generally viewed as gamblers or drug addicts; for Rogan, the collector's materialism violates society's ideology and norms, but not its (consumer) mentality.

Like Belk and Rogan, Jean Baudrillard (1988) is critical both of collectors—who "invariably have something impoverished and inhuman about them" (p. 106)—and collecting. However, whereas Belk and Rogan emphasize "passionate possession" more than the objects collected, Baudrillard (1988) focuses on the objects, suggesting that collected objects ultimately become the "things of which I am the meaning" (p. 85). According to Baudrillard (1988), "*everything that cannot be invested in human relationships is invested in objects*" (p. 90). Whether viewed as passionate possession, a specialized form of consumerism, or evidence of our dysfunctional relationships with others, the study of collecting may provide useful insights as to the meanings people assign to objects.

Household Objects

Household objects—including furniture—reveal a great deal about those who own them. Among the first to explore the importance of household objects in peoples' daily lives were Mihaly Csikszentmihali and Eugene Rochberg-Haton (1981), who sought to "to understand better the ties that bind people to the material world around them and the consequences of this relationship...." (p. 58) The results of their study point to the importance of household objects in general, and of furniture in particular: "Not surprisingly, chairs, sofas and tables are most often mentioned as being special objects in the home..." (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981, p. 58). Daniel Miller (2001) argues that household objects are becoming even more important to people as homes become "the site of their broadest encounters with the world through television and the Internet, but also the place where they reflect upon and face up to themselves away from others" (p. 1). Miller goes on:

> For this reason it is likely that people are paying increasing attention to their relationship to their home, to its structure, *its decoration, its furnishing and the arrays of objects that fill its spaces* [italics added], and that they reflect back on it their agency and sometimes impotence. It is the material culture within our home that appears as both our appropriation of the larger world and often as the representation of that world within our private domain. (p. 1)

Jules David Prown (1982) makes the argument that household objects reveal "certain fundamental beliefs in... society" (p. 4), beliefs which are often unarticulated but critical to cultural understanding. Prown argues that the way to study these unarticulated beliefs is to study the style of what a society produces. According to Prown (1982),

Stylistic evidence can be found in all modes of cultural expression, whether verbal, behavioral, or material. But a society puts considerable spin on what is consciously says and does. Cultural expression is less self-conscious, and therefore potentially more truthful, in what a society produces, especially such mundane, utilitarian objects as domestic buildings, furniture, or pots. (p. 4)

Retro Objects

In recent years, researchers have studied "retro" from various perspectives, including cultural studies (Collins, 1995), design (Baljon, 2002; Gibson, 2003; Kalman, Miller, & Jacobs, 1991) fashion (Gregson, Brooks, & Crewe, 2001; Silverman, 1986), mass media (Grainge, 2000b), and advertising (Grainge, 2000a; Heller, 1991; Wernick, 1997). What makes retro such a rich subject of research—from such a variety of disciplines—is how objects from the past are interpreted in the present, as Daniel Miller (1994) makes clear: "If the meaning of objects derives from the orders into which they are incorporated, *then the same artefact may change its implications* [italics added] simply by being introduced into some new order" (p. 400).

Objects "introduced into some new order" reveal something of exchange systems, notions of value, and their social and cultural context. For example, Miller suggests that the "birth of value" for second-hand clothing (retro or otherwise) lies in its authenticity: "it is their past which gives them authenticity, which gives them value" (Miller, 2000, p. 80). Arjun Appadurai (1986) suggests that studying the "trajectories" of commodities, we may learn more about exchange systems, that "it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context" (p. 5). Igor Kopytoff (1986) argues that it is the "life history" of an object/commodity that allows for its potential collectibility, its transformation from the "singularly worthless" to the "expensive singular" (p. 80). As objects acquire biographies, they also take on particular meanings, which become part of the exchange system. Marcel Mauss (1990) states concisely: "Things sold still have a soul." Novelist Michael Zadoorian (2000), in *Second Hand: A Novel*, describes "second-hand" this way: "I do think that when you own something that once belonged to someone else, it's like some secret contact with them, with their past. A way to touch people without having things get all messy and emotional."

Among the research about second-hand objects, the studies of retro fashion may provide the strongest parallels to the study of retro furniture. Nicky Gregson (Gregson et al., 2001) cites two key "modes of appreciation" for 1970s fashion in late-1990s London: "the Carnivalesque" and the "mode of knowingness" (p. 5). The Carnivalesque mode is appreciation by way of caricature, whereas the mode of knowingness is appreciation by way of connoisseurship. Kaja Silverman (1986), also studying retro fashion, emphasizes the recontextualized nature of second-hand objects:

At the same time, [retro fashion] avoids the pitfalls of a naive referentiality; by putting quotation marks around the garments it revitalizes, it makes clear that the past is available to us only in textual form, and through the mediation of the present. (pp. 150-1)

The Role of Nostalgia

Gregson et al. (2001) argue that "nostalgia is not one of the critical motivations at work" (p. 22) in the 70s fashion revival she studied. However, "the current nostalgia among baby boomers for their fifties childhood" (Bassin, 1994) is one of the most common reasons cited for the mid-century modern revival. Paul Grainge (2000b) finds Bassin's claim

insufficient, arguing that "[it] ignore[s] the significant popularity of retro and vintage styles among the children of baby boomers" (p. 28). A 1998 article in *Newsweek* corroborates Grainge's claim. In the article, *Wallpaper* magazine is referred to as "the bible of this retro renaissance" (Marin, 1998, p. 70). *Wallpaper* (which was launched in 1997) is, according to its founder and creative director, Tyler Brûlé, aimed at "a hip, global reader, 25 to 30, with decent disposable income" (Marin, 1998, p. 70). Further evidence of the younger generation's role in the mid-century modern revival can be seen in the success of auction houses specializing in modern design. Peter Loughery, founder of Los Angeles Modern Auctions, has said that "the new generation of collectors has stronger connoisseurship than even the Baby Boom generation" (Mason, 1999, p. 60).

This is not to say that nostalgia plays no role in the mid-century modern revival, only that nostalgia's role is more complex than it may appear at first glance. In "Nostalgia and Style in Retro America: Moods, Modes, and Media Recycling," Grainge (2000b) proposes that "there are perhaps two dominant tendencies at work in modern nostalgia critique, captured in the distinction between mood and mode" (p. 28). The nostalgia mood corresponds to the common use of *nostalgia*—to a sense of loss or longing, while the nostalgia *mode* corresponds to the "specificity of postmodern memory itself" (Grainge, 2000b).

Nostalgia was originally used to describe the condition of "extreme homesickness among Swiss mercenaries fighting far from their native land" (Davis, 1979, p. 1). Symptoms of the condition included despondency, melancholia, lability of emotion, and even attempted suicide. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, nostalgia had come to "describe any kind of home-sickness, whether psychologically disabling or not" (Wernick, 1997, p. 219). According to Andrew Wernick (1997):

> [Nostalgia] was also being extended from place to time, as in nostalgia for youth, as if time and place were interchangeable, and time itself a succession of irrecoverable homes... Hence the term's further extension as a mildly contemptuous descriptor for golden age myths of all kinds. (p. 219)

The nostalgia mode is a relatively new construct, according to cultural critic Fredric Jameson. Jameson uses nostalgia films as an example of "the insensible colonization of the present by the nostalgia mode" (Jameson, 1991, p. 20). For Jameson, the mid-century modern revival might be seen as a direct result of Modernism's "collapse." According to Jameson (1991), "with the collapse of the high-modernist ideology of style... *the producers of culture have nowhere to turn but to the past* [italics added]" (pp. 17-18).

Rather than focusing on either mood or mode, Grainge (2000b) describes the nostalgia mood and mode as forming the "poles of a theoretical continuum" (p. 29) and proposes the following strategy for mediation between mood and mode:

> In accounting for the development of nostalgia as a style, I would argue that a culturist position needs to mediate between the poles of loss and amnesia. This involves a particular kind of analysis that will neither ignore the development of nostalgia as it is bound in specific configurations of taste and textuality, nor underestimate the capacity for aestheticized nostalgia to construct meaningful narratives of cultural memory. (p. 29)

Following Grainge's suggestion, I have chosen to approach this study from a perspective that recognizes the importance of both nostalgia mood (i.e., loss of a *remembered* Golden Age) and nostalgia mode (i.e., historical

amnesia). This recognition, made early in the research process, was useful in developing the interview guide. The topics discussed with collectors reflect this recognition, and were intended to differentiate between responses related to nostalgia *mood* and those related to nostalgia *mode*.

Cultural Authority

Who decides which objects are collected? How do revivals begin? In *Rubbish Theory*, Michael Thompson (1979) uses the example of Stevengraphs (Victorian woven silk pictures) to illustrate the very specific trajectory of collectible antiques. According to Thompson, Stevengraphs originated in the *transient* category (in which value declines), and after some time became *rubbish* (at which point value was considered to be zero). But, after some time (and after being rediscovered) Stevengraphs entered a third category: *durable*. According to Thompson (1979), "at the start of this stage, the item acquires some value and the value continues to increase with time" (p. 18). Thompson's three categories may be appropriate for the mid-century modern revival; the furniture started out transient, became rubbish, and during the 1980s and 1990s became durable. Jim Collins (1995) finds Thompson's case study "fascinating," but "finally rather limiting" (p. 182). For Collins (1995), the limitation is in Thompson's view of cultural authority (and its origins):

> According to [Thompson's] theory, value evolves along only one trajectory; the transfers between states are controlled by a cultural elite, and at each stage there is virtual unanimous agreement about the value and significance of a given object. Thompson chooses not to investigate the dissonance of cultural evaluation, the simultaneity of different institutional frameworks that will make one object, or an entire movement, resonate in conflicting ways according to which site, toward which end, and for which public aesthetic histories are now conceived in order to justify which tastes. (p. 184)

Collins (1995) argues that the "semiotic excess" (p. 182) of the information age has served to destabilize cultural authority. Like Grainge, Collins (1995) sees a strong link between technology and the "ability to access the past" (p. 164). More important than the technology itself, however, is "the impact of information circulation on the networks of relations which determine taste, specifically what is and isn't *appropriate*, what is and isn't *appropriated*, according to which form of cultural authority" (Collins, 1995, p. 176). Collins uses the mid-century modern revival, which he calls *Retro-Modernism*, to illustrate his point.

According to Collins, "understanding the intricacies of aesthetic evaluation and historicization within the array of postmodern culture depends on our ability to see the interconnectedness of recirculation, re-articulation, and reevaluation" (p. 182). It is the matter of "aesthetic evaluation" that, for Collins, is at the core of the mid-century modern revival. As an example, Collins points to his own experience with *American Modern* dinnerware designed by Russel Wright. As with vintage modern furniture, *American Modern* is seen simultaneously as "the object of aesthetic appreciation outside of market exchange [in museums]", "a trendy design item to be acquired, quick, while it's hot [in interior design magazines]", and "a colorful piece of lost Americana [at flea markets and in antique stores]" (Collins, 1995, p. 182). As if to strengthen Collins' argument, the Oneida Corporation reissued Wright's *American Modern* dinnerware in 2000. For Collins, the only way that *American Modern* dinnerware can be evaluated so differently—yet simultaneously—is for cultural authority to be not in the hands of a cultural elite, but destabilized. It is this same destabilized

cultural authority that allows for mid-century modern furniture to be held up as both traditional and at the same time *avant-garde*, or what Collins (1995) calls "*arriere avant-garde*" (p. 185).

Retro in the Design Discourse

During the 1990s, with the mid-century modern revival in full swing, *Retro-Design* became the popular design language of everything from honey jars (Heller, 1991) to espresso cups (Collins, 1995) to cars (Gibson, 2003; Goldberger, 2003). Eventually, however, some began to criticize those designers who, to use Cornelis Baljon's words, "see history as a pattern book to be plundered at will" (Baljon, 2002, p. 334). In the essay, "History of history and canons of design," Baljon discusses design history and design theory, and how each informs current design issues. Although Baljon's examples come from architecture, many aspects of his argument are equally applicable to the larger design discipline. For example, Baljon (2002) contends that architects struggle with the "inevitable likeness" (p. 333) of their buildings with those found in the history of architecture. The same might be said of product designers; a contemporary chair will very likely bear a resemblance to historical chairs. This "inevitable likeness," according to Baljan (and Walter Gropius, to whom Baljan refers), is the result of the designer's unavoidable knowledge of history. However, Baljan (2002) makes the point that "an *observer* likewise knows too much history not to have his appreciation of a building colored by it" (p. 334). Similarly, observers of a chair also "know too much history."

Grant Gibson (2003) echoes Baljan's comments, but aims his criticism directly at car designers. Gibson sees the current wave of retro design as an understandable result of a powerful nostalgia brought on by "these... uncertain times" (p. 98). However, he suggests that designers have exploited this nostalgia, putting out designs that are familiar (and safe), rather than innovative. Gibson (2003) argues that the public will not be satisfied with such designs for very much longer: "While the public still seems happy to go along with manufacturers' reliance on the past for their inspiration for new products, it won't last. It's time to create our own version of the future" (p. 98).

In "Good History, Bad History," Tibor Kalman (Kalman et al., 1991) makes an argument similar to Gibson's, but directed at the graphic design profession. Kalman uses the term *Jive Modern* to describe the "abuse" of graphic design's history: "Designers abuse history when they use it as a shortcut, a way of giving instant legitimacy to their work and making it commercially successful" (Kalman et al., 1991, p. 120). And, just as Gibson's argument is essentially about creating our own future, Kalman's argument is about looking to the future for inspiration. According to Kalman (1991), "jive Modernism is a denial of the essential point of Modernism, its faith in the power of the present, and the potential of the future" (p. 120).

The mid-century modern revival has made the plundering of historical pattern books easy, and quite marketable for designers. The purpose of this research was to reveal something of the essence of mid-century modern furniture—as it is being recontextualized in the twenty-first century. This research, then, has been an honest effort toward what Kalman (1991) calls "good historicism... an investigation of the strategies procedures, methods, routes, theories, tactics, schemes, and modes through which people have worked creatively" (p. 122).

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN

Strategy

The strategy employed for this study is that of a case study, which Colin Robson (1993) describes as, "a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence" (p. 146). In this case, the phenomenon of interest is collecting mid-century modern furniture. The study's ethnographic approach, then, is aimed at exploring the "real life context" (shopping for mid-century modern in Palm Springs, CA) and "multiple sources of evidence" (extensive literature review and subsequent semi-structured interviews).

9. The term "thick description" comes originally from "The Interpretation of Cultures" (Clifford Geertz, 1973).

The intention of ethnographic research, according to Robson (1993), is to "provide a rich, or 'thick' description which interprets the experience of people in the group from their own perspective" (p. 148).[9] In the case of the present study, the "people in the group" are owners, collectors, dealers, and/or shoppers of mid-century modern furniture. The specific participants and locations chosen for the study (described in detail below) were intended to ensure that the eventual interpretation would indeed be from the perspective of "people in the group."

Methodology and Methods

The methodology and methods used for this thesis were as follows:

Planning

In the planning phase of the research, I first developed a list of topics and questions relevant to the study. Based on this list, I then performed the preliminary literature review. I was then able to develop a conceptual framework, which I subsequently used to guide further literature searches and develop an interview guide (included in Appendix A). The literature review included books, journals, magazines, newspapers, and Internet sites.

Data collection

Participants for the study were selected using what Robson (1993) calls "purposive sampling," a technique with which participants are selected based on "the researcher's judgement as to typicality or interest" (pp. 141-2). In this case, participants were selected based on their common interest in mid-century modern furniture. The location and timing of the research were chosen carefully, so that even a relatively small sample size might yield rich data. The Palm Springs Modernism Show is an annual event held in Palm Springs, CA. It is a large and prestigious antiques show for display and sales specifically of mid-century modern design and decorative arts. Palm Springs Consignment is a retailer of mid-century modern furniture located in Palm Springs (see Figure 2). The store's owners allowed me to conduct interviews in their store (which was—as they had predicted—very busy during the entire weekend of the Modernism Show), and made arrangements for additional interviews to be conducted at the show itself.

Interviews were used as the method of obtaining data from the study's participants. Robson (1993) calls interviews "conversation[s] with a purpose," a data gathering method with "the potential of providing rich and highly illuminating material" (pp. 228-9). For this study, semi-structured interviews were used to allow the researcher some flexibility "based on [his] perception of what seem[ed] most appropriate in the context of the 'conversation'" (Robson, 1993, p. 231).

Figure 2. Palm Springs Consignment Retail Store—Palm Springs, CA

Of the 27 participants[10] interviewed for this study, 20 were interviewed at Palm Spring Consignment, five were interviewed at the Palm Springs Modernism Show, and two were interviewed at their residence in Tucson, AZ. Interviews conducted at Palm Springs Consignment generally lasted 10-15 minutes, compared to the 5-10 minute interviews conducted at the Modernism show. The longest interview—almost 50 minutes in duration—took place at the participants' residence in Tucson.The majority of participants were shoppers at Palm Springs Consignment who volunteered to be interviewed. Because of the purposive sampling technique used, and the voluntary nature of participation, little consideration was given to the age or sex of participants. Basic demographic information for all participants is included in Table 1.

During the interviews, I asked participants several questions related to the topics and questions outlined in Chapter 1. The interview guide is included in Appendix A. Because I used semi-structured interviews, each interview was unique. In some cases I asked precisely the same questions in the same order; however, in other cases, I modified the questions and/or the order of the questions in response to the participant's earlier responses.

In addition to the collectors/shoppers interviewed in this study, others were interviewed as well. The collectors provided a firsthand perspective of acquisition, ownership, and display of mid-century modern furniture. Antiques dealers who specialize in mid-century modern furniture also provided a valuable perspective, as they are often more familiar with general trends in collecting. And, at any rate, many dealers are collectors as well (which provides yet another interesting perspective).

All participants signed letters of consent for this research study, and all but one participant[11] signed video release forms.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participant	Sex	Age[a]	Interest		Interview Location[b]
			Collector/Shopper	Dealer	
Joni	F	Boomer+	•		PSC
Glenda	F	Boomer	•		PSC
Caryl	F	Boomer+	•		PSC
Gayle	F	Boomer	•		PSC
Derek	M	Gen-X	•		PSC
Ken	M	Gen-X	•		PSC
Ron G.	M	Boomer	•		PSC
Marcy	F	Boomer	•		PSC
Susan	F	Boomer	•		PSC
Dimitri	M	Gen-X	•		PSC
Duane	M	Boomer	•		PSC
Andy	M	Boomer	•		PSC
Ron S.	M	Boomer	•		PSC
Terry	M	Boomer	•		PSC
Bruce	M	Gen-X	•		PSC
Don	M	Boomer	•[c]		PSC
Charles	M	Boomer+	•[d]		PSC
Jimmy	M	Gen-X	•	•[e]	PSC
Miguel	M	Gen-X	•	•[e]	PSC
Udo	M	Boomer	•		PSC
Jacques	M	Boomer		•	PSMS
Alan	M	Boomer		•	PSMS
Jeremy	M	Gen-X		•	PSMS
Thomas	M	Gen-X		•	PSMS
Jonathan	M	Gen-X		•	PSMS
Laurie	F	Boomer	•		PR
Jim	M	Boomer	•		PR

Notes for Table 1:
[a]In many cases, age was estimated; however, several participants offered their age during their interview. [b]PSC = Palm Spring Consignment; PSMS = Palm Springs Modernism Show; PR = Private Residence (Tucson, AZ); [c]Also a set designer for films. [d]Also a prominent designer from the 1950s and 1960s; [e]Co-owners Palm Springs Consignment.

Data analysis

All interviews were recorded on videotape and subsequently transcribed. The interviews were then analyzed according to the following four-step process:

1. The first step was "to find some concepts that help... make sense of what is going on in the scenes documented by the data" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 209). To do this, I first categorized responses from participants according to the original set of topics and questions. Responses that fell outside of the bounds established by the topics and questions were set aside, and then placed in new, tentative categories, as necessary.

2. I then coded responses within each category, and studied categories for patterns. For "detailed guidance" regarding coding, I adopted Tesch's eight-

step process (as cited in Creswell, 2003, p. 192). These patterns were then made into categories, as I attempted to "reach a position where one has a stable set of categories and has carried out a systematic coding of all the data in terms of those categories" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, pp. 212-3).

3. I organized the categories of patterns visually in order to understand better "the mutual relationships and internal structures of categories" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 213).

4. Finally, I developed a matrix that would be able to describe visually the relationships between and within categories. This matrix is described in detail in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Over the course of the coding process, various patterns emerged. In my attempt to give structure to my findings, I considered several approaches (e.g., past vs. present perspectives, Gen X vs. Baby Boomer perspectives, semantic differentials, etc.). Ultimately, however, I borrowed from the work of Gregson, Brooks, and Crewe (2001), and developed mt own "modes of appreciation": *Aesthetic*, *Connoisseurship*, and *Comfort*. Each mode is made up of multiple elements, as illustrated in Table 2. Each is described in detail below, with actual participant responses included.

Table 2. Modes of Appreciation and Related Elements

	Elements						
	History/ Preservation	The Look	Simplicity/ Craft	Good Design	Nostalgia	Reappropriation	Education
Aesthetic	x	o	Δ	o	x	Δ	Δ
Connoisseurship	o	x	x	Δ	x	o	o
Comfort	Δ	x	o	x	o	x	x

o=Strong relationship; Δ=Moderate relationship; x=Weak/no relationship

Aesthetic

Perhaps the most obvious of the three modes of appreciation is the *aesthetic* mode. As described extensively in Chapter 2, the mid-century modern revival is due largely to the *look* of mid-century modern furniture. The *aesthetic* mode is made up primarily of the following elements:

- The Look
- Good Design

Each element is illustrated with examples below.

The Look

Many of the participants interviewed consider themselves to be rather serious collectors, but some indicated that reproductions and knockoffs—generally scorned by serious collectors—weren't all bad. Bruce, for example, is of the opinion that there's "nothing wrong with imitations if [they] still exude the same... feeling... and comfort." For Ron S., the goal of decorating with mid-century modern is not to create a museum environment, but to create the "flavor" of mid-century modern:

> I'm not the complete purist... The things that we've done here [at our Palm Springs Home] are... have the *feeling* of the mid-century, but it's really also very modern and more like "right now." I don't think there would have been spaces like the living room here done in 1961... just because of the color and the materials used. But it has that *flavor*... (Ron S.)

Ron S. was not the only participant to use the term *purist*. Jimmy and Miguel use the same term to describe one of two distinct categories of clients that visit their store. The Purist wants only completely original pieces, whereas the Revisionist is interested only in the right look:

A revisionist doesn't really care—all the revisionist wants is something that will work in his house and give him the look he wants. And, I mean, he may have some... some original things, or he may just want that look and want to completely do it all in one color fabric. It's like art or anything else—it's just a personal matter of taste, and I don't think one's better than the other. (Jimmy, co-owner Palm Springs Consignment)

Many participants indicated that, although they don't generally buy reproductions and knockoffs, they don't necessarily limit themselves to the work of well-known designers either. Udo, for example, is attracted to a piece primarily by its beauty (although it's interesting to note that price also plays an important role).

It's all about design. If I see something, I'm not going to... if I go into a store, and I see a beautiful lamp, and I like it—like, I have a lot of lamps—I don't care who the designer is. Okay, if I pay $2,000 I want to know who the designer is, because I want to have an explanation why it's so expensive. But, in general, I like just beautiful design. (Udo, collector)

Like, Udo, Laurie is attracted to the look of mid-century modern design, but Laurie describes it in somewhat different terms:

I think it's the shapes. I think it's the shapes and the colors that draw people's eyes. And people will see a red Diamond [chair, designed by Harry Bertoia]... the red Diamond before they see the Mies van der Rohe stuff, which stands out to me, you know, the Mies is... it's so phenomenal but I think mostly it's the shape that, that draws the eye and the playfulness. It's fun, it's a fun look, it has, it just looks like it's fun. (Laurie, collector)

The look of mid-century modern has been the focus of design trends for several years now, receiving increasing exposure from the popular media. During the interviews, participants were asked about the trends they've seen in recent years, and the possible reasons behind the trends. In this case, the dealers interviewed provided numerous insights. Bruce, Jimmy, and Miguel all see a strong connection between the media exposure and the revival.

Actually, more like... more like five... four, five [years ago] is when you noticed all the magazines' major exposure, and then it's caught on and this... these furnishings have become very vogue. That's my sense of the... of the... the rush. And, you know, it's—as with anything that's popular, or embraced by many people—it becomes a... a domino effect. If some people are doing it, then it gets talked about, and it becomes... it becomes vogue. And there's nothing wrong with that. I mean, it... it's a beautiful design and beautiful idea, and it is exciting to see people embrace that. (Bruce, interior designer and collector)

[Y]eah, things come in and go, where they become—yeah, all the sudden everybody *does* want Architectural Pottery, or everybody wants a certain artist, all of the sudden, like a Calder or somebody. But, it... yeah, you go through periods where that's what everybody's coming in and asking for. And I think the media and so on... and all the newspapers, and the things we see—that's what gets people... They all the sudden... you know, you're seeing 18 different stories in one week throughout the world on Architectural Pottery, sure people's interests are aroused... (Jimmy, co-owner Palm Springs Consignment)

Yeah... you see it a lot now in commercials and all that, you know, and TV. I think that's how people get an interest in it—they see it on TV and, you know, they start liking... that style too... (Miguel, co-owner Palm Springs Consignment)

Not surprisingly, most of those interviewed for this study see the mid-century modern revival as more than just a fad. As co-owners of Palm Springs Consignment, Jimmy and Miguel have been selling mid-century modern for approximately nine years, and see no end to its appeal.

> Jimmy: [T]here's always gonna be a certain degree of people that are gonna keep Modernism alive, just like there's always gonna be people that collect antique antiques—old antiques—you know, Chippendale, or whatever. There's always gonna be somebody out there—it may not be as... as... fashionable and as hip as it is right now. 'Cuz it's kind if the in thing right now to be into modern. But I think there'll always be a market for the modern furniture, and I just... I don't foresee it going away anytime soon. I've had a lot... I've heard a lot of comments that it's just a passing thing and people are gonna get bored with it...
> Miguel: Yeah, and that was five years ago?
> Jimmy: Yeah. I've been hearing that for at least five years, even before we got real, real serious...

Jacques, one of the promoters of the Palm Springs Modernism Show, as well as a dealer, echoes the comments of Jimmy and Miguel:

> No, Modern... certainly, Modern hasn't peaked! If you just look at the number of repros and companies that reissue the major classics from the mid-century era... Obviously, if there was no interest, they wouldn't do it. So there is a huge interest in the material. And, more and more, as more and more people are exposed to it. (Jacques, collector, dealer, and promoter)

Jonathan, also a dealer, commented that the popularity of mid-century modern has been a sort of double-edged sword.

> It's gotten to the point where almost everything is being knocked off. So the stuff that's vintage had to be in perfect condition or it has to be pieces that aren't reproduced. The general public still likes the affordable stuff, but the serious collectors look for stuff that's hard to come by.
> (Jonathan, dealer and collector)

Like fashion, designs come and go. Although the look of mid-century modern continues to be popular, it is bound to cool off eventually. A 1997 headline from online satirical "newspaper" *The Onion* stated, "We May Be Running Out Of Past!" According to this tongue-in-cheek story, Americans are recycling the past at such a rapid rate that by 2005 we may run out of the past completely. Obviously, this is not to be taken literally; however, there seems to be some truth to the story. Indeed, some dealers interviewed—though they specialize in mid-century modern design—do see designs from the 1970s and 1980s already starting to become popular.

> I just... you know, I think it's the passage of time. I mean, you know, you wait fifteen minutes and the 80s are going to be appealing, you know. I mean, I hate to be that way, but it's true, you know...
> (Don, collector and set decorator)

> The 70s are popular now; they were not ten years ago because, naturally, not enough... not enough time had elapsed, so probably in a couple of years we'll see the 80s being very sought after... where the gap between the actual time of the design and the resurgence of interest gets, you know, limited, you know... It used to be 40, 50 years; now it's 20 years since we're already starting to collect 80s with it 20 years ago...
> (Jacques, collector, dealer, and promoter)

Good Design

In Design 1935-1965: What Modern Was, Martin Eidelberg (1991) credits the Museum of Modern Art and their "Good Design" shows with helping bring

modern design to the general public in the post-war years. As a result of these (and other) shows, "the terms Design and Good Design became part of a new international language" (p. 151). This certainly seems to be true among the participants interviewed for this study. Several participants used "design terms" to describe their attraction to mid-century modern furniture, as illustrated in the following excerpts:

> Yeah, we bought a whole set of Saarinen—the table and then the four chairs, with two side chairs and two armchairs. And it's original Knoll International stuff. And it's just... it's spectacular. Whether you like it or not, it has integrity. It has a real value as far as the design aesthetic is concerned. (Duane, collector/shopper)

> You always... you find you always get what you pay for—it's... it's... well, well-crafted. (Terry, collector/shopper)

> I think a lot of it was very good design—simple as that. It was very good design. (Ron G., collector/shopper)

For Charles, an influential mid-century modern furniture designer himself, it is the integrity and innovation of particular designs that lead to their eventual rediscovery.

> Messerschmitt was in business for at least four years. And he did a great job—he had a way of fastening acrylic which wasn't like the people who use metal and use wood. And therefore, I honored his work because it was clever the way he thought about it; he thought about it as not being wood; he thought about it as not being metal first. And when people do take the time to, like, get to know what medium is that they're working in, and they just don't go in there and think they know something, you have to honor that. And so I did like Messerschmitt's work...
> (Charles, furniture designer and collector)

For Dimitri, an interior designer who specializes in mid-century modern, the elements of "good design" found in mid-century designs are not easily found in contemporary designs.

> I mean, I think there's a reason why Modernism is relevant today, and... in today's world, and there's so many people that are interested. And I really think it kind of... it kind of condemns a lot of—not the design world, or the designers, per se, because there's so much fabulous work coming out now—but it kind of attacks the, kind of, "replace" consumerism, you know, that is pushed by Ikea, for instance. Which is kind of the democratic form of design—it's what Eames and Nelson, all these guys were reaching for was, you know, well-designed, well-functioned pieces... but *well-made*. And companies like that don't make a well-made product... they make it very accessible, but... These pieces [vintage Modern] have lasting value, from an aesthetic point of view, and from the money that you spend, it'll be around for 30, 40, 50 more years. I mean, many of these pieces... one of the chairs that we have in the living room is an original 1965 [Hans] Wegner chair—in its original upholstery. I'd like to see, you know, a chair made today last that long, and have its upholstery last that long in as good a condition—I mean, it's in perfect condition. (Dimitri, interior designer)

In *Architectures of Excess* Jim Collins (1995), suggests that, "[N]ow, as Modernism is being relentlessly historicized, that which was transitory with a vengeance is being reevaluated according to a new gold standard that valorizes the *next-new-thing* and *timeless classics* simultaneously" (p. 158). Collins' theory is supported by the comments of several participants, including Duane, who reported, "Modernism has a timeless kind of reference as well. Everybody of every era looks for *modern*, what comes next." Laurie's comments also support Collins' theory. For Laurie, the fact

that young children think hers is the "coolest house" they've ever seen is evidence of the freshness of the furnishings—despite their age:

> And really... really the only family members that don't like our furniture are the ones that don't like Christmas either. And I had that person come with her grandchildren once and they were probably 12 or 13 and 10 or something like that, and the youngest one said, 'This is the coolest house I have ever seen.' And I... I said 'A ton of kids say that.' And this person said, 'What does that tell you?' I think that it tells me that it's fresh and new and innovative even though it's old and it's... it's classic. (Laurie, collector)

Don, a movie set decorator, describes how the timeless, or classic, element of mid-century is what has led to reproductions and knockoffs:

> I have a friend who says that, you know, something that... something that became hip once is, you know... that's a good thing, but when it becomes hip a second time, then it's a classic. So that, you know, if a Florence Knoll sofa... or... or a Vladimir Kagan lounge or George Nelson lights—whatever it is—this is their second time around, right? People are starting to, like, 'Oh, yeah, we know that...' And *Normal Joe Guy* knows that name of those things, right? Then it becomes a classic. And then, you know, look at... you turn around and now Design Within Reach is... reissuing that stuff. (Don, collector and set decorator)

The Aesthetic mode of appreciation, then, consists of the more obvious elements of any revival; it's about what is fashionable or popular, or what is receiving the most media exposure at the moment. In this sense, it may seem to be a highly superficial mode, one subject to fade quickly. However, the participants interviewed expressed stronger feelings about their mid-century modern furniture—few indicated any desire to change once the current revival cools. These feelings are described by the modes of Connoisseurship and Comfort.

Connoisseurship

Many participants' comments suggest that mid-century modern design is a means for them to express their discriminating taste in their homes. The category of *Connoisseurship* corresponds to this ownership and display of furniture as a means of expressing "good taste" and to issues of preservation. The *connoisseurship* mode is made up primarily of the following elements:

- History/Preservation
- Reappropriation
- Education

Each element is illustrated with examples below.

History/Preservation

In her study of collecting, Akins (1996) suggests five reasons for collecting, one of which is for the collectors "to connect themselves with history" (p. 108). Clearly, this was one motivation for some of the participants interviewed for this study. Some had firsthand knowledge of the history while others did not. Don—a Boomer—suggests that, "there was a beautiful period of time when design was really king during that period of time. And people were really excited about Modern design..." Bruce—a Gen X-er—refers to the 1950s as an "exciting decade" of design:

> Now I've had a passion for the 50s for many years, so it's exciting for me to see that... that people... are embracing, you know what—what is now 50 years ago. To me, it was a very exciting decade, and that's also what brought me to it, and what I find great about it—it was an exciting design period. (Bruce, collector and interior designer)

For Joni, mid-century modern design represents not only a particular aesthetic, but an American aesthetic as well:

> I think it's marvelous! I really think it's... it's incredibly American... The Modern period for me kind of begins, for me, in a way in Calif... in Los Angeles with Eames... And American designers of that period were really bringing an essential American-ness... it was a simplicity of form, economy of design one color, uniform, monochrome... it was the beginning of what is now known as minimalism, I suppose. And it was organic... it was both organic and geometric... those were kind of the two, for me, parallels.
> (Joni, collector/shopper)

The relationship of history to preservation is an obvious one (making it easy to combine the two into one element). Indeed, several participants expressed a desire or need to preserve mid-century modern design as something of historical significance. Tied closely to this idea of preservation is the idea of authenticity; many participants emphasized the importance of originality or authenticity of furniture pieces, as illustrated in the following comments:

> Andy: So it's not about, "oh you got this piece and you have that piece..." You know, it's not about collecting; it's actually making it beautiful. And having people...
> Duane: And preserving and sharing it with people...
> Andy: People that you love...
> Duane: Having it there for posterity... It's wonderful, interesting stuff. It's very, very valuable in terms of the human experience, not in terms of economic value. (Andy and Duane, collectors/shoppers)

> You know, every piece of furniture is like a person—it has some character to it... there's some story... I mean, if some of these things could talk...
> (Jimmy, co-owner Palm Springs Consignment)

> So like our sofa we just purchased, we're having redone—not in leather—in original-style vinyl. *Virgin* vinyl! So, it's... it's a lot of fun, and it's very interesting. And it's wonderful also to see people take stock of the value of something that for so many years has been categorized as being... seen in a negative perspective. (Duane, collector/shopper)

Preservation is a trade-off, of course, especially as it relates to furniture that one generally expects to use. For some participants, preserving certain pieces becomes a source of anxiety.

> [I] maybe just have one piece as a piece where nobody sits in... and sometimes—I mean, I have two original... original fabric... Coconut Chairs, so I'm really scared if somebody would spill a glass of soda or wine—especially red wine on that. I would be really mad. But then, you cannot have furniture and tell people not to sit in it, so you have to risk that.
> (Udo, collector)

> The day bed... I don't let anyone sit on our day bed because the day bed is held up with leather straps and the leather straps are old and I don't want someone to go through. Not that I care if they get hurt, I don't want them to ruin our vintage Mies day bed. (Jim, collector)

Laurie, who is Jim's wife, and also a serious collector expresses with some regret the tradeoffs they've made to amass their collection of mid-century modern design: "I would like... I kind of miss the furniture that people could plunk down in and not have to worry about."

Many participants saw strong connections between mid-century modern architecture and furniture. In retrospect, this could have been expected, considering that most of the participants were interviewed in Palm

Springs—a city considered by many to be the Mecca of mid-century modern architecture. These participants collect mid-century modern furniture specifically to go with their mid-century modern homes.

> We started... this is our fourth edition... we started four years ago in 2000. We felt there was a definite need for such a show in here—in Palm Springs, mostly because of the resurgence of the resort as a major center of mid-century architecture. And all the interest in the architecture provoked, of course, accordingly, the interest in decorative arts and fine arts, which is what we do here at the show. Architecture and... outside and inside of houses, obviously, go together, so the interest in architecture totally legitimized our... our need to do a show here.
> (Jacques, collector, dealer, and promoter)

> The design process is very well tied to the architecture—the two speak to [each other]. There's... there's kind of a harmonics between the furniture and the architecture. When you... when you try to introduce, I think, contemporary—or I should say *some* contemporary pieces—there's almost a clash. Certain homes—and I wouldn't say, you know, with all Neutras it's one way, with all Wrights it's another way... the architecture begins to have a conversation with the furniture, and the pieces just kind of feel right and they fall... everything just kind of falls into place. (Dimitri, interior designer)

> Then when we ran into the architecture, we moved back toward, "OK, what kind of furnishings would go in this kind of a place, and who did what, and how should it appear?" (Duane, collector/shopper)

Reappropriation

This sub-category includes responses that refer to the mixing of mid-century modern with other furniture (newer or older, and possibly of very different styles) as a means of demonstrating connoisseurship. I created this category based on the work of Kaja Silverman (1986), who reported a similar phenomenon in retro fashion:

> A critical aspect... is the binary logic through which fashion distinguishes "this year's look" from "last year's look," a logic which turns upon the opposition between "the new" and "the old" and works to transform one season's treasures into the next season's trash... Retro refuses this antithesis. Because its elements connote not only a general "oldness," but a specific moment in both the (social) history of clothing, and in that of a cluster of closely allied discourses (painting, photography, cinema, the theater, the novel), it inserts its wearer into a complex network of cultural and historical references. At the same time, it avoids the pitfalls of a naïve referentiality; by putting quotation marks around the garments it revitalizes, it makes clear that the past is available to us only in textual form, and through the mediation of the present. (pp. 150-151)

Just as in the case of retro fashion, connoisseurs of mid-century modern furniture often put "quotation marks" around their furniture through very deliberate juxtaposition and contrast, avoiding the "naïve referentiality" that Dimitri calls, "a contrived space... in other words, trying to get a "1958" look... or a "1960" look..." Mixing mid-century modern furniture with pieces from other eras was common among participants, as illustrated in the following exchanges:

> Andy: You know, I found... we found a stenographer's desk, you know, in blond wood and it was designed very well and it just had a nice, perfect angle, and you know, the drawer comes out for the... I mean, that's a history... you know, who knows what a stenography is today? You know, it's all technology...
> Duane: Of course, I use it for my laptop, but still...
> (Andy and Duane, collectors/shoppers)

Marcy: We do have some mid-century modern furniture, which was my mother's... from the 50s—gorgeous.
Ron: The *real* stuff.
Marcy: Yeah, that she never even changed. She used it right up until the time she died in March. So now I have it. And... but ... it's not *all* mid-century 'cuz that would be boring, you know.
(Marcy and Ron, collectors/shoppers)

This mixing of era or styles may be something that comes only with experience and training, however. Jimmy refers to it as a form of "evolution" among his clients, and Dimitri refers to it as his clients "understanding the movement as a whole." Susan (who is one of Dimitri's clients) describes her experience of collecting and mixing mid-century modern as a never-ending process. For each of these participants, mixing pieces is one marker of connoisseurship.

Yeah, I mean, I find that people that first start collecting this stuff... I always find that people go a whole different direction when they first start buying from us in the beginning. The... the, you know, they're [all over the place]... and then *they* get an idea of what *they* want. And I think everybody evolves into a little different thing—the more they start collecting modern furniture, or getting to see it, you know, now they don't like the first pieces they got—they're not quite up to speed where they want to be. I find that's a very, very common thing in our business. We'll have clients that we first started with, maybe three years ago, that are a completely different direction [now]. (Jimmy, co-owner Palm Springs Consignment)

You know, when people—and I've seen people jump into Modernism and they grab all one style, or, you know, all Eames, wherein they kind of mix it up with very predictable pieces... As they begin to understand the movement on a whole, they start... you start seeing mixing, both new work and with old work, and different designers. So it doesn't become your stereotypical "We're recreating, or we're reliving a time period that has gone by." (Dimitri, interior designer)

I started out with... ethnic art when I was much younger, collecting pillows from India with little mirrors in it, and wood birds and that sort of stuff. And then gradually—it was a process—and then gradually I got into... more into the mid-century modern furniture... and pottery and glass. But, I mean, it's been like 15 years or 20 years it took me to get where I'm at now. It's just a process and it's still going on; it's never ending... I like combining the ethnic with the mid-century, if you do it carefully, it's very interesting. You know the... the rugs—Afghani rugs—they're simple enough, and they're geometric—a very interesting mix. (Susan, collector/shopper)

Education

Education plays an important role in connoisseurship of any kind. Indeed, Akin (1996) suggests that "knowledge and expertise" is what identifies "a 'serious' collector" (p. 104). Over the course of the interviews, participants frequently displayed their own knowledge and expertise about mid-century modern design. Of course, education need not be formal, as is illustrated in the comments below. Education methods can be broken down into low-tech and high-tech categories, with low-tech corresponding to the use of books or an informal apprenticeship, and high-tech corresponding to the use of the Internet as research tool. Many participants employ both low- and high-tech methods.

Just by hanging around people that know a little more about it than I do, like some of the dealers that I know. You know, they'll say, 'this is a so-and-so coffee table.' You know, early on I had no clue. I mean, I'm still not an expert at it, but there's some things I can look at now and I know what it is. And, like an Egg Chair... I had an Arne Jacobsen Egg Chair... there are copies of that around and, you know, once you own the real thing, you can

kind of tell which is an original and which is a copy... 'cuz there are certain little differences... like the Eames chair, the Eames lounge chair—there was a few companies that made knockoffs of that. So, you know, over the years, you just kind of pick up a little bit here and there, and you learn about it. (Derek, collector/shopper)

And then we just started getting more and more into it. We'd go to all the modern shows and we even would time our vacations to go to Illinois so we could go to the Winnetka show in Illinois. Just ask people lots of questions, read lots of catalogs, look at lots of books. (Laurie, collector)

And I think the way you learn about it is just by going to places like this, and looking and asking people who know... especially in Palm Springs, there are several stores... San Diego has several stores. So, just going in and keeping abreast of what's going on, and there's wonderful books on it too, so... And, you know, owning a house that's mid-century, gives me the impetus to really, look more things up and know what's going on. (Terry, collector/shopper)

Books... books. And, fortunately, eBay... 'cuz you can get a lot... you can track stuff there and find out what the going price for it is. And then when you come to places like this, you can compare, you know, and say, "Oh, okay, you know, this is what it's going for." You know, different areas sell it for different things... But, yeah, a lot of, a lot of old books... we go to old bookstores and look at, not reference books, but old, architectural books... (Glenda, collector/shopper)

We're living in a computer age time—I mean, people get much more information. If you don't know about [Richard] Neutra or John Lautner, you just punch their name in on the computer and you get their whole life story. So, I think it's just information... (Udo, collector)

If the Aesthetic mode of appreciation can be thought of as the most superficial of the three modes, then the mode of Connoisseurship is located beneath the surface, on a deeper layer. Here the appreciation for mid-century modern has been fueled by knowledge and training, which in turn leads to desire for preservation. Connoisseurs of mid-century modern see in it a great value—beyond merely its monetary value. One surprising outcome of the interviews was that even the connoisseurs refuse to turn their homes into museums or furniture shops by collecting exclusively mid-century modern. They prefer (careful) mixing of periods and styles, while using the mid-century pieces as the centerpieces. On the surface this may be counterintuitive, but upon further inspection, it makes perfect sense: the careful mixing becomes, itself, yet another marker of connoisseurship.

Comfort

Many people look for furniture that is comfortable. However, the Comfort mode of appreciation is less about physical comfort and more about psychological and emotional (and in some cases, it almost approaches a spiritual) comfort. The comfort mode is made up primarily of the following elements:

- Simplicity/Return to Craft
- Nostalgia

Each element is illustrated with examples below.

Simplicity/Return to Craft

Several responses included some mention of the simplicity of mid-century modern furniture as one reason for its appeal. Marcy, a collector, calls it "unobtrusive," "where you... you come into a home and you don't really notice the furniture, but you feel comfortable there." For Glenda, the

simplicity of mid-century modern counters—at least in part—a complicated life:

> My personal take is, you know, life's so complicated and, you know, let's simplify it, let's get... you know, some really nice simple designs in your house that you think will last, you know, good quality stuff, And I think a lot of this stuff has that mark on it. (Glenda, collector/shopper)

Some participants contrasted the simplicity they see in mid-century modern design to the "overstuffed" look they see in contemporary furniture. For Caryl and Ron S. contemporary furniture is indicative of greater issues:

> I think, too, if you look at... if you go into furniture galleries today, or you go into homes that have been newly redone, the furniture is *huge*—it is so, kind of like the way a lot of Americans live today, I think, you know, they have so much more than they really need, and it has that look to it, and it's almost offensive sometimes... even though you can still sit down, you kind of get lost in the whole thing... And with these [mid-century modern pieces]... sit in this, and you're sitting in a chair—you're ready to converse, I don't know... to me, it's just a whole different feel.
> (Caryl, collector/shopper)

> [A]n amazing number of people would rather live with things that are very clean-lined and simple. And I think it's probably now a backlash to all of these—in La Jolla, we call them McMansions—that they're building, that look like Tuscan villas, which I think are ridiculous, and... it's sort of a rebellion against those. (Ron S., collector/shopper and interior designer)

Although mass production was crucial to the success of mid-century modern furniture, many participants spoke of mass production in derogatory terms. This may be due to the fact that many of the more recognizable pieces of mid-century modern design were not only mass produced, but produced in great quantities. These pieces were quite desirable during the earlier part of the revival, but have since cooled off, as Thomas and Jeremy—dealers in mid-century modern—note:

> Thomas: All the Herman Miller mass-produced—Eames, Nelson stuff was really on fire about 3 or 4 years ago, but you could also tie that to the whole dot-com thing because it also fit in really well with the office...
> Jeremy: And also... also, it was extremely accessible. So it was like if somebody was just getting into Modern, you could find it all over the place, so that was an easy way to start with Modernism.
> Thomas: I prefer, like, non-mass-produced stuff... it's just more interesting. And I think it's gonna endure...

Glenda, herself a glass artist, prefers mid-century modern furniture because she sees it as "artisan-made." Ironically, Haywood-Wakefield furniture, which she cites as an example of what she prefers was, in fact, mass produced in great quantity. Nevertheless, for Glenda, "50s furniture" evokes a response that new furniture simply does not:

> If I go into a new furniture store, I think I see... I think I automatically see *machined* edges... *machined*, you know, corners... You know, it's like when you look at this stuff, it's more artisan-made—is what it seems to me. I mean, even people like... you know, Haywood-Wakefield, which is probably, you know, the more popular stuff you see around here... it's not straight edges; it's this nice smooth... you know, you just want to touch it, you want to play with it, you want to feel it, you want to connect to it, you know... When you walk in to look at new furniture, you know, the first thing I always notice is, you know, the nuts and the bolts, and, you know, industrialization of it—you know, knocking out a thousand pieces at one, you know... Production—you can just see it's production.... I guess that's what it is... You know, I would much rather find me a good quality piece of,

you know, 50s furniture than to buy something newly-made...
(Glenda, collector/shopper)

Nostalgia

Several participants referred to nostalgia directly or indirectly as one of the reasons for their ownership of mid-century modern. Not surprisingly, the only participants to do so were Baby Boomers (though not all Boomers reported elements of nostalgia). For Terry, mid-century modern furniture represents something he wanted growing up, but never had until now. For Gayle, the mid-century modern revival is a form of "revisiting when you were kids."

[W]ell, I *lived* through it... amazingly enough... and I remember back then thinking that it was like, *Wow, this is really interesting, you know, it's so different...* My mom was a, you know, a traditionalist, and if it didn't have— if it wasn't Early American, it didn't exist, you know. If it didn't have an eagle or a... or a... a scallop on it somewhere... I just hated that all my life. I was able to talk her into a dining room set one time that was pretty plain and was... was really nice... it was maple and she was happy about that, but... Yeah, that's as close as my family ever got to mid-century stuff. Then, when I was looking for a house... I only looked at like five of 'em, and I walked into this one and I said, "This is it." You know, it just had that feel... you know, mid-century feel. And so I thought, *Yeah, now I can do all the things I always wanted to do...* so, and it's really fun...
(Terry, collector/shopper)

It's kind of like revisiting when you were kids, and seeing the things that we wished our parents had, or they did have, or we wanted for ourselves, and of course they got out of style, and now they're kind of back in style, so it's kind of nice to see that. (Gayle, shopper)

Some participants reported a more acute nostalgia. For these participants, one of the attractions of mid-century modern design is that it represents not just their childhood, but distinctly better (more fun, more secure, etc.) times.

Well, I think a lot of it is the fact that we live in uncertain socio-economic and political times and the certainties that we do see tend to be things that we don't tend to care for a great deal. And that we're trying to return, or at least hearken back to, times and objects of times that we had a more secure attitude about... that, you know, I mean, I was hippie in the 60s—that was a wonderful time... And I think the 50s, while they had a lot of problems, and a lot of difficulties, had a lot of securities and certainties, and very fond positive childhood memories for us, and... by the way, I don't dye my hair—it's all mine... so you know I lived through it once before.
(Duane, collector/shopper)

And it was a different time; it was a kinder... I don't know—we certainly went through a lot in the mid-60s... the 50s and 60s, with the Kennedy assassination... And I think that... that really solidified in peoples' minds the style that was going on at that time. Because that was... that was Camelot in the United States. I remember... I remember that so well and how wonderful everything was... And there was certainly a coming of age after his assassination—it really changed things. So I... I think that... for me, that kind of holds it. I remember the style of clothes, you know, I remember all of that... it was a good time... Times are a little different now.
(Terry, collector/shopper)

If the Aesthetic mode is the most superficial, and the mode of Connoisseurship represents a deeper layer of meaning, then the Comfort mode of appreciation represents the deepest layer of meaning. For the participants who find some form of comfort in their collections of mid-century modern design, trends and rising prices have little impact. For these participants—who often see

their homes as sanctuaries—mid-century modern furniture is an integral part of their homes' interior design. Whereas Daniel Miller (2001) suggests that our homes' interiors reflect both the appropriation of the outside world and its representation within our private domain, the Comfort mode of appreciation offers yet another perspective: home interior as *protection from the outside world*.

Summary

All of the transcribed interviews were studied for patterns, and then coded. Three primary modes of appreciation emerged: *Aesthetic*, *Connoisseurship*, and *Comfort*, each having corresponding elements, as described in the preceding section. Interestingly, although the modes of appreciation cited by Gregson, et al. are mutually exclusive,[12] the modes of appreciation I've cited overlap considerably. Furthermore, this overlap is dynamic. Some participants, for example, reported that they were drawn initially to mid-century modern because of nostalgia—they had either grown up with mid-century modern, or wished that they had. These same participants, once they began to learn more about the furniture, then began to appreciate its design aesthetic and design history (i.e., "moving" from the Comfort mode to the mode of Connoisseurship). This is clearly a different phenomenon than that observed by Gregson, et al. A detailed analysis of this "movement among modes" is beyond the scope of the current study, but is worth further consideration as part of future work (more of which is discussed in Chapter 5).

12. Indeed, as the authors point out, the very existence of the Carnivalesque mode threatened those in the mode of Knowingness.

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSIONS

In this final chapter I would like to offer my interpretations of the findings outlined in the previous chapter, as well as some suggestions for future work. First I will discuss the importance of "the authentic" to collectors of mid-century design, along with a brief word about the contemporary nature of the mid-century modern revival. Secondly, I want to relate the mid-century modern revival to the recycling of media products. Thirdly, I will discuss some of the insights I've gained by way of this research into the mid-century modern revival. And finally, I will offer two comments regarding future related research.

The Authentic

In their study of the 1970s fashion revival in 1990s London, Gregson, Brooks, and Crewe (2001) suggest that knowledge plays a key role:

> As important—indeed, much of the pleasure to be gained from 70s clothing—is the shopping, the quest, the hunt, the searching out. And this is where knowledge and knowingness becomes all-important, critical parts of consumer's repertoires. So the ability to be able to identify the original, the authentic, and to be able to spot it within a sea of mundanity, becomes paramount... (p. 17)

Not surprisingly, "the ability to identify the original, the authentic" is of paramount importance to connoisseurs of mid-century design as well. In Chapter 4, I discussed some of the ways in which participants have become educated, have developed their eye for mid-century design. At the same time, connoisseurs reported that they don't want to make museums and furniture stores out of their homes; they don't want what Dimitri calls "contrived spaces," in which they are "trying to get a "1958" look, or a "1960" look..." In other words, even the connoisseurs mix original vintage pieces with new pieces, or pieces of another era and/or style. Duane and Andy use their vintage stenographer's desk for Duane's laptop; among Jimmy and Miguel's collection of vintage furniture sits a reissued Eames surfboard table. There are additional parallels with fashion theory as well—this time in the work of Kaja Silverman, who suggests that "retro avoids the pitfalls of a naive referentiality; by putting quotation marks around the garments it revitalizes, it makes clear that the past is available to us only in textual form, and through the mediation of the present" (Silverman, 1986, p. 150). By mixing mid-century furniture with other pieces,[13] connoisseurs are "putting quotation marks around" the objects they are revitalizing too.

13. "If you do it carefully," as Susan is quick to remind us. These are, after all, connoisseurs.

One doesn't put quotation marks around a fake, of course. It became clear over the course of this research that much of the meaning derived from mid-century modern furniture is related directly to its authenticity. Even in the case of knockoffs, there is some element of authenticity, as Bruce pointed out: "Nothing wrong with imitations if it still exudes the same... feeling..." Here Bruce is referring to "period knockoffs," which have an element of authenticity stemming from the fact that they are of the period; their legitimacy is derived from their age—or vintage. Accurate reissues (e.g. Vitra's Nelson clocks, Herman Miller's Eames surfboard table, etc.) have an element of authenticity as well. In this case, it is not the age of *production*, but the age of *conception* that matters. In either case, there is an "authentic past" that allows for successful recycling. This begs the question: how will the *Retro-Design* of today—lacking in this type of authenticity—be recycled?

The answer is outside of the scope of this research; however, it may be a attractive subject for future work along the same lines.

The Present

Despite the great deal of attention paid to nostalgia in the previous chapter, I would suggest that collecting mid-century modern design is more about the present than the past. This is at the heart of the mid-century modern revival, just as it is at the heart of Silverman's retro fashion: the past is mediated through the present. On the surface, this may seem counterintuitive, but even "nostalgia has much less to do with the past than with the present; it is present anxieties, concerns, and existential discontinuities that evoke and amplify it" (Davis, 1979, p. 135).

The "quotation marks" Silverman refers to cannot be applied retroactively; they exist only in the present. The participants I interviewed—even the "hard-core" connoisseurs—don't want their homes to become museums or time capsules. For these people, mid-century design does represent the past—but, as with Silverman's retro fashion, this past is "mediated through the present." A simple matrix describing the temporal nature of Silverman's quotation marks is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Origin/Context Matrix

Object's *Origin*	Object's *Context*	
	Historical	Contemporary
Historical	I	II
Contemporary	III	IV

Table 3 is made up of four quadrants:

I: In the first quadrant, both the object's origin and context are historical; in other words, this quadrant is historical. However, museums also fit into this quadrant, since museums generally consist of historical objects set (as best as possible) into historically accurate contexts. It is this first quadrant Dimitri referred to when he said that some home interiors attempt to "recreate... a time period that has gone by."

II: In the second quadrant, the object's origin is historical but its context is contemporary. This is the quadrant of interest here, the quadrant in which Silverman's quotation marks exist. Here the power of the revival (be it fashion or furniture) is evident *in its context*. As Silverman notes, retro refuses the past/present dichotomy—in other words, quadrant I and IV. Likewise, participants in this study emphasized the importance of mixing mid-century modern furniture with contemporary items (often related to contemporary technology—computers, televisions, etc.).

III: In the third quadrant, the object's origin is contemporary but its context is historical—an obvious impossibility.

IV: In the fourth quadrant, the object's origin is contemporary and its context is contemporary. Where furniture design is concerned, this is what some participants referred to when they mentioned "new, overstuffed furniture."

Recycling Media Products

By all accounts, the 70s are currently being recycled, and the 80s are on the way. What I am suggesting is that the recycling of mid-century design and architecture marks the beginning of what's to come (and what's already begun). Fred Davis correctly links the marketing of nostalgia to the broad distribution of popular media. It's no coincidence that recycling the 1950s has been so successful—this was the first decade during which living rooms were flooded with images—delivered, of course, by way of television. Even those far too young to remember the 1950s know about "the fifties."[14] Davis suggests that where homes, streets, and persons were once the subject of nostalgia, now media products have come to take their places. When we think of our childhoods, we think of popular music, television shows, or movies as much as—or more than—specific people and places. What's more, "because they are commercially produced en masse, the media images tend toward greater uniformity of meaning and constriction of evocative association. Their possibilities for subsequent recycling, manipulation, and symbolic control are, therefore, greatly enhanced" (Davis, 1979, p. 30).

The parallels to consumer products are numerous, of course. A recent article in *Newsweek* argues that, "Gen X-ers turned nostalgic much earlier than the 30-year-olds of decades past... because, inundated with video, musical and commercial messages from birth, they have lived more media lives in fewer years" (Poniewozik, 2004, p 65). They have lived more product lives in fewer years too. And what of Gen Y and Gen Z? How many media lives—or product lives—will they live before they become nostalgic? Perhaps *The Onion* was right when it reported in 1997, "We May Be Running Out Of Past!"

The Mid-Century Modern Revival

The aim of this research was to understand the various meanings ascribed to vintage modern furniture by those who valorize it. These meanings have been described generally in Chapter 4. Over the course of the study, however, I was able to gain some additional insight into the mid-century modern revival as a whole. These insights may help to put the current research into the wider cultural context, as well as inspire future work on similar topics.

Something as complex as the mid-century modern revival cannot be boiled down to a handful of factors, a simplistic mathematical formula. If that were the case, it would be easy enough to predict "the next big thing." I see the revival as the result of many, many factors coming together simultaneously. Certainly, I have hit upon only a few of them over the course of this research. I've come to think if it as a sort of "perfect storm," in which all of these factors—some related, others unrelated—combined at a specific time, resulting in the rediscovery of mid-century modern design.

Perhaps the stage for the mid-century modern revival was set during the eighties, as many Americans began to focus their attentions (once again) on the home. Faith Popcorn calls this the trend of *cocooning*:

> The last gasps of the eighties found Americans huddled in high-tech caves. Cocooning, the trend we first predicted in the late seventies, was in full spin. Everyone was looking for haven at home—drawing their shades, plumping their pillows, clutching their remotes. Hiding. It was a full-scale retreat into the last controllable (or sort of controllable) environment—your own digs. (p. 27)

14. According to Fredric Jameson, the former is historical, while the latter is merely a representation of some vague "pastness."

According to Popcorn, Americans were staying home more often—renting movies, browsing mail-order catalogs, and remodeling their homes (possibly inspired by PBS's *This Old House*). The market for shelter magazines continued to increase throughout the nineties, and into the new century, ad noted in the title of a May 7, 2001 *New York Times* article: "Stay-at-Home Instinct Fosters Flush Times at 'Shelter' Magazines" (Peluso, 2001). Just as telling as the title was the fact that it appeared not in the Arts section, but in the Business Day section. It turns out there was big money in cocooning.

The nineties also saw a string of museum exhibits featuring mid-century modern design (as was described in Chapter 2), each of which spawned books and other museum store products that helped hype the exhibit (and the revival). These exhibits brought to our attention many of the founding fathers—and mothers—of design, especially post-war design in America. For some, this was a rediscovery; for others, this was their first exposure to these designers (and, perhaps, to Design itself).[15] The timing seems more than coincidental; during the nineties Design had become part of the mainstream American lexicon (Postrel, 2003).

15. This may help to explain the popularity of mid-century modern among Generation X.

In *Architectures of Excess*, Jim Collins (1995) writes, "the retro phenomenon has been all-pervasive, especially as the ability to access the past has been enhanced by technological developments such as the computer, the VCR and digital recording, and commercial developments that allow for successful merchandising of nostalgia" (p. 164). At the time, Collins could not have known the impact the Internet, and specifically online auction site eBay (launched in 1995) would have on the "retro phenomenon" (which may be seen as both "technological development" and "commercial development"). Despite its modest beginnings in 1995,[16] eBay grew quickly, with 7.7 million registered users in January 1999. By November 2001, that number had increased to 37.6 million, with eBay boasting "approximately 400,000 new item listings per day in more than 2,900 categories" (Robinson & Halle, 2002). In 2003 eBay reported that, "on any given day, there are more than 12 million items listed on eBay across 18,000 categories. In 2002, eBay members transacted $14.87 billion in annualized gross merchandise sales" (eBay—Company Overview, 2003). With the past so newly accessible, it's no surprise that much of the consumption that takes place via eBay is "retro consumption," or what journalist and historian Molly McCarthy (2001) calls "consuming history":

16. Initially the only category on the site was Pez dispensers.

> They are consuming history, in the dual sense of the word: buying it up, and using it up. They are the ones glued to PBS's *Antiques Roadshow*. They are the ones scouring the attic for family heirlooms that might fetch a good price online...

These are just some of the factors that together have to the mid-century modern revival. No one factor alone is responsible, but each factor plays a critical role. Without the cocooning trend, would we have felt so compelled to decorate our homes with pieces from the *Vitra Chairs* exhibit? Without the Internet in our homes, how would we learn about—and purchase—design icons of the past? Tied up in all of this is, of course, some element of nostalgia. If the retro phenomenon is as pervasive as Collins claims (which I think it is), it must be that we have some longing to satisfy.

In his essay, "TIME's Past in the Present: Nostalgia and the Black and White Image," Paul Grainge (1999) suggests that black and white images offer what color images cannot:

> To the broader question of why a society requires certain images at a particular time, the answer for black and white can perhaps be found in its basic capacity to arrest a sense of meaning, historical and otherwise: to stimulate slowness in a climate of speed, to evoke time in a culture of space, to suggest authenticity in a world of simulation and pastiche. (p. 384)

Similar to the mid-century modern revival, Grainge's case for black and white images are objects of the past set within a contemporary context (another example from quadrant II in Table 3). Indeed, it is the context that gives the images their power; black and white photographs are not particularly rare today, but they *are* rarely used in *Time* magazine. What I am suggesting is that mid-century modern furniture (or other examples from quadrant II, such as retro fashion) has a similar "basic capacity to arrest a sense of meaning." Indeed, some of the same elements—slowness and authenticity—are represented in the model I have proposed here. I would further suggest that this "capacity to arrest a sense of meaning" was necessary (although insufficient alone) for the mid-century modern revival.

(Comfort) Food for Thought

When I first began this study, I was firmly on the side of Grant Gibson, who has argued, "It's time for us to create our own version of the future" (Gibson, 2003, p. 98). However, over the course of the study, I've come to question this position. Does our current fascination with mid-century modern design represent what Edgar Kauffman, Jr. called, an "embarrassing indication of a lack of faith in our own values"? Perhaps it does. If so—if we do lack faith in our own values—how can designers hope to "create our own version of the future"? Now may not be a time for looking forward, but a time to contemplate, to take stock—to *cocoon*, as Faith Popcorn says. Following the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, many people turned to comfort food as one means of coping. Maybe mid-century modern design is a similar means of coping, during what even Gibson concedes are "uncertain times."

Future Work

One of the unexpected findings from this research was that so many people mix their vintage modern pieces with other furnishings (in other styles, from other periods, etc.) in their homes. However, in very few cases did I inquire about the specific furniture they mixed with mid-century modern. This may be a fruitful area of further work, especially to investigate how these same people incorporate technology into their homes. I learned from Andy and Duane, for example, that they use a vintage stenographer's desk as a laptop desk. Considering the attention these participants pay to "the authentic," it would be interesting to learn more about the criteria they use when purchasing technology that will mix with their carefully-selected furnishings (e.g. televisions, stereos, computers, DVD players, etc.).

In their study of the 1970s fashion revival in 1990s London, Gregson, Brooks, and Crewe (2001) describe two distinct modes of appreciation: "the Carnivalesque mode," and "the mode of knowing." It's interesting to note that neither mode includes an element of nostalgia. On this point, the researchers are quite clear: "[A]s we have been at pains to emphasize here, nostalgia is not one of the critical motivations at work in the reappropriations that we have identified. Rather it is reappropriation that matters..." (p. 22). In the current study, however, nostalgia was found to be an important—and relatively common—aspect of the revival.

It's interesting, then, to consider why nostalgia is such an integral part of the mid-century modern revival, but played no role at all in the 70s fashion revival studied by Gregson, et al. (2001). Obviously furniture is not the same as fashion[17]—although it may be considered fashionable; certainly, both may be used to represent taste. Despite the many parallels between the two studies,[18] one significant difference stands out: Among the 70s revivalists interviewed by Gregson, et al, none was old enough to have been part of 70s fashion the first time around. By contrast, many of the participants I interviewed for the current study are old enough to have either grown up with mid-century modern furniture,[19] or to be otherwise aware of it.[20] Among the younger participants I interviewed—and this is, admittedly, a small sample size—none spoke of nostalgia for mid-century modern furniture. From the literature, and from the participants' comments, it's clear that many Gen X-ers do buy and collect mid-century design. For the Boomers I interviewed, nostalgia was a significant factor; this seems unlikely in the case of Gen X-ers. On the other hand, some have suggested that nostalgia in a Postmodern world exists in other forms as well, such as "nostalgia without memory" (Appadurai, 1990) and "nostalgia for the present" (Grainge, 1999; Jameson, 1991). It may be that younger buyers aren't immune from nostalgia, per se, only from the more common "strain." This area of inquiry may be of special interest to designers, as it related to the current *Retro-Design* trend. How might these other forms of nostalgia affect young buyers' perception and/or expression of "the authentic"?

17. Although some participants did compare furniture to fashion, in that both have cyclical tendencies wherein specific pieces or styles (furniture or fashion) move in and out of fashion (and then, very likely, back in again).
18. It would be easy enough, for example, to describe elements of the Carnivalesque mode and the mode of knowing (which resembles what I have dubbed "Connoisseurship") among the participants I interviewed.
19. Furniture, after all, generally outlasts clothing; even those growing up in the 1960s may have been surrounded by post-war furniture
20. Often by way of media products—television, movies, advertising, etc.

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