DINING ROOM IN THE MODEL FLAT

BOOK-CASE, DISH RACK, LINEN CLOSET AND WINDOW-SEAT IN THE DINING ROOM
THE GOSPEL OF SIMPLICITY AS APPLIED TO TENEMENT HOMES. BY BERTHA H. SMITH

It is not money that makes comfort or beauty or artistic effect in a house. It is thought. The day of emancipation from the fallacy of the opposite belief is dawning. More crimes have been committed in the name of house furnishing than all the punishable crimes on all the court dockets of the land. The charge lies at the door of those women who have insisted upon the expenditure of money, not thought, in buying things for the home. Things! They have been the cause of many a well-meaning woman’s undoing. Too many women have, all-willingly perhaps if unwittingly, come under the dread “tyranny of things.” Whoever invented that phrase never formed one with a bigger, or sadder, truth. We have been taught respect for our mothers and grandmothers, but the way they meekly submitted to the tyranny of tidies and throws, of whatnots full of impossible junk known as bric-a-brac, of dust-catching, insect-breeding, microbe-sheltering plush furniture and hangings, and by example taught us the same submission, is enough to make us question,—but, there, respect for our elders and betters bars questioning and criticism. At all events, those houses of yesterday and to-day are enough to wring tears from the eyes of the family portraits compelled to look at them day in and day out from their gaudy gilt frames on the wall.

The hopeful are keen to every hopeful sign. One of the hopeful signs is the mission established in New York to teach the gospel of simplicity in house furnishing. This mission is a feature of the many-sided work of the Nurses’ Settlement, which is such a potent factor in the regeneration of New York’s East Side. This is not a mission in name, nor has it the surface meaning of one; but in fact it is nothing less, and the pity is that it is not patterned after the portable school house that it might be carried hither and yon to preach this gospel of simplicity to every creature who has to do with furnishing a home. It has come to be known as the Model Flat. By means of the Model Flat the settlement workers have undertaken to solve some of the problems of the tenement, though its lesson is as sadly needed by some millions of housewives outside the tenements as by the other millions in them. Between the two sorts there is the difference of the Arab proverb, the difference between one who knows not and knows not that he knows not, and one who knows not and knows that he
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knows not. The first, the proverb says, is a fool and should be shunned. The latter can and should be taught.

To quote Miss Mabel Hyde Kittredge, who has personal supervision of the Model Flat and who has evolved the idea of it: “Many have asked me why is the Model Flat? This is my answer: The foreigners who come to this country want to adopt our civilization. They want to do things as we do them. But they have no way of knowing what to choose and what not to choose. They have not been educated to choose between that which is in good taste and the tawdry. The showy lace window curtain, the big hat, the riotous upholstery, the exaggerated styles of dress make the loudest bid for their attention; and in their anxiety to be like us we find them adopting our barbarities instead of our better things. The tenement woman does not need this teaching of simplicity and good taste more than the woman who paints snow shovels and hangs them in the parlor, who covers rolling pins with plush and who insists upon loud-toned Axminister as the sine qua non of a well furnished room; but the responsibility is greater with the foreigner who wants to be taught and is in danger of learning the worst of our ways for lack of better example. I have been reading a series of articles on the freedom of the Russian immigrants. And I have come to feel that they will never know real freedom until they are freed from the ‘tyranny of things;’ until they come to know that comfort and refinement and artistic surroundings are not so much a matter of how much money is spent as of how it is spent.”

The Model Flat teaches two lessons in economy. The first is a lesson of economy of money and space. This is based upon a practical theory of simplicity and of thinking twice before spending. The second lesson is one of economy of time and labor, and is based upon system and the “know how.” The first of these is shown in the furnishing of the Model Flat; the second in the teaching of the rules of good housekeeping. The flat is in the midst of the most crowded tenement district of New York. It is better than some apartments in the neighborhood because it is in one of the more modern tenement buildings. It is not so good as many others. It is subject to all the restrictions and the few privileges of other flats in the neighborhood. There are four rooms, for which the rent is $24.00, a fair average.
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There is a living room, a dining room, kitchen and bedroom about seven by nine feet. There is no bath, and no closet save the two kitchen cupboards which are the particular pride of tenement builders, intended to show a thoughtful generosity toward the housewife. The regulation fireplace-less mantels are evidence of the same generous spirit in living room and dining room, while a coal range and stationary washtubs complete the kitchen equipment. The bedroom has four walls and a window, the latter a luxury compelled by the tenement house commission.

When Miss Kittredge began to furnish the Model Flat she had the almost universal belief in floor coverings. Through the Model Flat she has learned as well as taught. She put down rugs, which was all well enough until the first general cleaning day came round and she ran against the law. Rugs cannot be cleaned indoors, and the area between the Model Flat and its neighbors is about the length of one good breath, and half as wide. Under such conditions the natural thing to do is to shake the rugs out of the front window. The law makes this a misdemeanor. So up came the rugs and down went a coat of paint, which nobody liked. The paint was scraped off and the floors were stained in weathered oak, which can be done for a few cents and a few hours of work by any woman. For a time the neighborhood looked askance at these bare floors. Bare floors were a sign of poverty, not a clean, labor-saving, artistic answer to the floor question. The tenement is not synonymous with poverty, and tenement dwellers would not have you think so. Many who are poor live in tenements, but many who live in tenements are far from poor. But presently it came to be a sort of fad to do things as the Model Flat does, and many a young bride has furnished her little flat with never a thread of carpet, and blesses the Model Flat for this step toward her emancipation.

After the floors came the question of furniture. The men who bid for East Side trade are like their uptown fellows, only worse. They think people want all they can get for their money. They think the more machine scroll work, gorgon heads and claws, the more big brass handles, the more stuffing, the more colors in the plush, the better. What the furniture man shows the immigrant housewife buys, thinking, and quite truly, be it confessed, that she is becoming
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Americanized. Simplicity is not yet the creed of the many. The Model Flat has not an inch of plush nor a yard of woollen drapery from front door to back window. In fact, there is not a yard of stuff in it that cannot go into the washtub. Curtains, cushion covers, bed spreads, screen coverings,—all can come down and off as often as need be, and be made fresh and clean. The chairs are all of wood, with good, honest, straight lines. The best one in the living room, barring one which came as a gift from a well-wisher of the flat, cost less than five dollars. Two or three is an average. For the dining room were selected what are commonly known as kitchen chairs. These were treated to the stain left over from the floors, and at thirty-five cents each provided seats as comfortable as any, more durable and in better taste than many dining room chairs costing from one dollar up. For the living room a writing table, and another table for the lamp and books and magazines—which are by no means lacking in homes of East Siders, and particularly the Jewish homes—were made to order in mission style at the cost of cheap factory furniture. Shelves in otherwise unused corners, a chest of drawers and a soap box converted by means of a hinged lid and a coat of stain into a chest for the necessary but unsightly things that accumulate in a living room, completed the furnishing of a cosy and attractive room.

NOT losing sight of the fact that sleeping accommodation is the most vital point in the problem of tenement life, the mistress of the Model Flat placed a bed in the living room. The teaching here is that the sleeping apartment should be the room with the most light and fresh air; and that, above all things, the kitchen should not be used for this purpose.

No mere teaching can get at the root of this tenement evil. It is a question that can only be settled by a revolution in economics resulting in reduced rents. So long as a four-room flat rents for from twenty to thirty dollars in the districts where the hard-working classes live, there will be sub-letting of rooms and consequent over-crowding; there will be mattresses piled high by day and spread over all the floor space by night. Provision for six people is all that can with comfort or decency be made in these four rooms. This means two single beds in the living room, each with a trundle; and in the tiny bedroom two more single beds. Two spring cots in the bedroom
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leave an aisle of less than two feet between; but even so, the young men or women of a family may find here that degree of privacy which is absolutely imperative with those in whom any sense of refinement has been awakened. The living room can be used by the parents and younger children.

The beds in the Model Flat have good springs, and the mattresses are good. In the bedroom the mattress is covered with a pretty, light colored cretonne that the bed may be left uncovered during the day and serve as a couch. The bedding is removed, and as storage room is the scarcest thing in these flats, a double purpose is served by putting blankets and comforts in pillow slips made of the same cretonne, matching those holding the pillows. The sheets are folded and laid away on one of the shelves which, with a dressing table made out of a dry goods box, are hidden by a curtain in the corner opposite the door. One corner of the living room is cut off by a screen made of a common clothes-horse painted with white enamel and covered with denim in solid color. Behind this screen stands the enamel toilet set, which is meant to do away with the use of the kitchen sink, which, with the stationary washtubs, is the tenement bathing place. It is meant, too, as a lesson in modesty, which is at a shocking discount in crowded tenements. With the all-pervading idea of making the most of every inch of space, hooks are screwed on the inside of the frame for hanging nightdresses, slippers, or other articles of clothing.

All told, the furnishing of bedroom and living room of the Model Flat cost $51.00 in money. It would be hard to say how much in thought, or how much money was saved by the thought. There is no scrimping in quality. That is not economy. Everything is good of its kind. The furniture, though simple, is durable. The muslin curtains cost as much as cheap lace, but are more a part of the scheme of simplicity and good taste carried out by the plain wall paper, the white paint and single tone of wood furnishings and floor.

IN the dining room thought has again taken the place of money. A big, plain, substantial table was picked up in a second-hand shop and stained to match the chairs. The table linen is good enough for anybody, and a supply of doilies are a sort of stepping stone from the bare table to a fully covered one. Those who stop on the stepping stone find themselves well within the bounds of good taste. The
dishes are cheap blue and white, but ever so much honester in style than the tawdry gold-decked and beflowered things that the pushcart man offers "so sheep, mees-es" that the housewife is tempted to stop and buy before she knows better. But where the thought has counted most in the dining room is in the making of space out of a broad bare stretch of wall by means of shelves. Nothing may be nailed to walls in a New York tenement, and above all things the Model Flat would teach respect for the law. So instead of fastening the five long shelves to the wall, they were fastened to uprights which stand on a long boxed-in set of broader shelves resting on the floor. These lower shelves are provided with doors and are used for household linens. The end reaching into the corner makes a window seat. In the Model Flat the upper shelves are used for books, the dishes being kept in one of the kitchen cupboards; but the tenement housekeeper can save steps by keeping her dishes here. For just ten dollars, and the thought, the room is provided with dish rack, linen closet and window seat. In addition to this the dining room furniture cost just $13.10, not including the dishes, which appear in the kitchen bills.

The furnishing of the kitchen cost more in proportion than any other room in the house, these bills footing $24.88 of the grand total of $107.55. Though we came in at the front door and reached the kitchen by the usual course, this is not the order in which the Model Flat was furnished. The kitchen is the hub of the home, and the woman who pinches in the kitchen to spend in the parlor makes a mistake. The Model Flat is strong on this point. First the walls were painted, for paint can be washed and kept clean. Paper and plain plaster cannot. There is no shade at the window because a shade cuts off an all-too-small supply of light and air. In addition to the two stationary cupboards, another was bought at second-hand. The two provided with the house are used for dishes and kitchen utensils; the third as a grocery closet. Glass fruit jars neatly labeled hold tea, coffee, sugar, spices, cereals,—those things too often left in paper bags which break and spill their contents on the shelves. The drawers of this cupboard are for kitchen knives, forks and spoons and other small things that must have a place, and the shelves below are for kitchen towels, aprons and the like. On the ends of the cupboard nails are driven for the bread board, for aprons in use, for the string bag; while the narrow space beyond the cupboard makes a corner for
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the ironing board and step ladder. Another corner has a small shelf on the under side of which are hooks for broom, wall brush, dust pan, whisk, floor brush, and all other implements of warfare against dirt. The supply of utensils is complete to the last detail, with sauce pans and kettles of every size, measuring cups, chopping tray,—in short, everything the home cook needs from a paring knife to an ice cream freezer. Ice is a luxury in the tenements, and the Model Flat teaches how to be happy without ice. A grocery box was fitted to the outside of the kitchen window and anchored there with hooks. Holes were bored in it for ventilation, and an oil cloth curtain dropped over the front to keep out the dust. In this improvised refrigerator butter, eggs, milk and other perishable foods can be kept perfectly without ice save in the very hottest weather.

HAVING come in at the front door, we have made our exit through the kitchen window. By the time we get around to the front door again it will be time for some of the classes of girls who come here to learn how to keep house in the Model Flat. That is the second lesson in economy, the economy of time and labor. The underlying principle here is that there should be a place for everything and that everything should be kept in its place. In cooking schools and kitchengartens children are taught housekeeping by theory; but theories vanish into thin air when it comes to applying lessons learned with doll dishes, miniature washtubs and liliputian brooms of the kitchengarten or even the immaculate porcelain tables, individual gas ranges and precise appointments of the cooking schoolroom to the every day, life-size, disordered home kitchen. In the Model Flat the girls find utensils of a size and kind they see at home, and the lessons learned can be directly applied without confusion of mind. These lessons begin with the care of the kitchen stove, run on through the correct setting of the table, the cooking of simple every day foods, washing of dishes, bed-making and general housecleaning, to laundry work and other special features of housekeeping which the woman of moderate means must do without a servant's help.

Always the home conditions of the girls are kept in mind; and while the tendency is always to raise the standard of living, all the little economies are made to serve this end rather than the encouragement of needless extravagances. The old newspaper is not discarded
for cloths, but is used to clean lamp chimneys and to spread on the kitchen table to protect it when it is used for dusty or dirty work. Empty fruit jars and glasses and bottles are shown to serve the same purpose as canisters that cost more; and flour sacks and worn out sheets are shown to have a place in household economics.

From the Model Flat these lessons have been carried into many a tenement home, where a semblance of order has been brought out of the chaos of crowded conditions. But it is when the time comes for these girls to make homes of their own that the work of those who have put so much earnest thought into the Model Flat will have its full fruition. Already there are classes enough to occupy all the hours of the day and early evening, and to meet the demand of the neighborhood a new flat will be rented as soon as the settlement workers have means to devote to this purpose. The fees paid by the children are only barely sufficient to pay for the supplies used by the classes.

THE LAST TRAIN HOME

Before me another day’s journey
    Out into the din and the strife,
The squalor, the pageant and tourney,
    The surge and the motley of life.

Brief haltings by wayside,—awaking
    To pitiless life’s undertone,
The peaceful green pastures forsaking
    To tread dusty highways alone.

Of star-vaults beyond this contending
    I dream;—where the tired ones roam,
The day’s journey crowned with glad ending,
    And waiting—my last train for Home!

In weary quest I wandered far and long,
    Through silent paths,—skies overcast;
Love woke the star-born echoes of a song;—
    “No more alone,—amid the gaping throng—
    All paths lead home, lead home at last!”

John H. Jewett.