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The beach shack of old versus everything in the kitsch sink

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So, the classic beach shack is over. The Aussie shack du jour, says a new book by Stephen Crafti, *Beach Houses Down Under*, "starts at 300 square metres" and is emphatically not "designed to be filled with muddy dogs and sandy kids trailing wet, salty towels". No modest fibro here, with its worn furniture, its found flotsam and its unmatching crockery. No way. That's no longer acceptable dune-top kit. "The new beach house is a masterpiece of design and architecture," says Crafti, complete with ensuites, air-con and guest wings, using sophisticated materials that reflect "a new aesthetic and lifestyle – a world of luxury and design, glamour and desire".

The tragedy is not that Crafti is wrong, but the extent to which he's right. Not just about the shack, but about architecture in general. It's as if, in rejecting modernism's commitment to truth, the entire architecture game, as hurrahed along by architectural publishing, has become a flat-out race for pretentiousness max.

The beach house argument, as Crafti puts it, is an economic one. Having paid through the nose for that piece of cliff or dune, the last thing you're going to do is put a shack on it. Which is to say, we've built a society where education and wealth have become so estranged that those who can afford beachfronts or architects, and especially both at once, are unlikely to have anything much in the way of tastebuds.

This shouldn't matter. After all, we chose democracy, and the booming beach 'burb is its direct consequence. But matter it does. Not only because of the

mad hypocrisy of replicating at the beach the array of nature-repudiating devices you left home to escape, like the archetypal American globetrotters loaded up with Mars Bars and hamburger mix. Not only because of the environmental waste of such duplication. Not only because of its flab and ostentation. But because underlying all these is the question of kitsch.

A 19th-century German term of uncertain etymology, kitsch was used by Theodor Adorno, Clement Greenberg and the rest to denote the opposite of the authenticity that was art. Then Andy Warhol made "kitschy" a compliment, giving kitsch the ironic appeal that allowed it to intersect with camp, as defined by Susan Sontag. Suddenly, anything exaggerated, caricatured, folkloric or mass produced could be an icon of intellectual avant-gardism and – this is crucial – no one would know the difference.

From the high chroma garden gnome to the Aphrodite-shaped pepper grinder, from the rubber Virgin Mary mask to the outsize Hitler youth hologram; anything could be embraced as kitsch as long as it was sufficiently tasteless and popular. Gillo Dorfles, writing the definitive text on the subject in 1968, even – and probably unpardonably – included the sand parade of the standard-bearing Coogee lifeguards in his kitsch compendium.

So, why should our marble-and-glass beachside ostentations be any different? Will they become the kitsch of the future, beloved bad taste of some self-appointed avant-garde, just as "austerity/binge" and mid-century modern are now?

Perhaps, but it's difficult to imagine. A clue may lie in the refined definition of kitsch offered by Milan Kundera in 1984. Kitsch, wrote Kundera, "is the absolute denial of shit". This may sound like a jolly good thing. But what Kundera meant, of course, was that kitsch is the denial of truth; kitsch is the sanitised, genteel self-parody into which we so easily slip in the headlong flight from death. Kitsch, in other words, is not simply vulgar. Kitsch is manifest euphemism.

And this is the contemporary coastal castle's least endearing aspect. Not its ugliness, its greed or its enviro crimes but its relentless, vicar's wife euphemism. The Dutch intellectual Rob Riemen, leader of Holland's Nexus Instituut, spoke at last year's Aspen Festival of Ideas on "Kitsch and the Crisis of the West". Western cultural crisis, of course, is like midlife crisis; perpetual, over reported and often, in any case, enjoyable, but Riemen made some useful points.

Kitsch is the meeting point of ethics and aesthetics. Not the boisterously vulgar – the golliwog ashtray or the fur bikini – and not just fun, or cheek, or

fantasy. True kitsch, so to speak, involves a deliberate cleansing of the truth. It is what impels us to pursue the comfortable rather than the genuine, and to make this pursuit socially required. Kitsch is the collective pretence that a second plasma screen television is a genuine spending priority and the conformism that demands this pretence even from those who cannot afford and do not want it.

That's what makes these epidemic beach mansions rude and dangerous. With their glam and polish, their air-con and their mod-cons, they whisper the same false promise that high office whispers to politicians: exemption from nature. They lie, but we love them for it.

The charm of the endangered Aussie shack, by contrast, was its recognition, even for a few weeks a year, that for all our aspirations and inspirations, we're still barefoot bipeds, still subject to the grandeur and wrath of sand, sea and sun. The shack tells us the humble truth. We extinguish it at our peril.