THE ARRANGEMENT
AN ARCHITECTURE THESIS
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WITH ADVICE FROM
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Architects place objects in representations to justify the dimensions of a room or the placement of a door. We point at a drawing to show where a table fits with six chairs. But who sets the table? A decorator knows that a vase of flowers can transform a space, so why don’t architects?

Decorators are famous for making arrangements. Some good architects are too. The title of this thesis is “The Arrangement”
Architectural history yields few building types that position interior objects as equally relevant to the floors and walls that constitute the Architecture. The house is sometimes an exception. This thesis takes the form of a house.

For John Soane...the arrangement of interior space in his house in London is based on an arrangement of collections of objects, where rooms are defined by sets of objects rather than sets of walls.

For Ray and Charles Eames, their house is a stage set for the objects they designed and collected. The arrangement of objects in the interior is as significant as the arrangement of the kit of building parts that the house is constructed from.

For Gerrit Rietveld and Truus Schroeder...the interior of the Schroder house is continuous with the exterior. It would be impossible to study one without the other.

Hiding in the photographs of studied canonical houses are objects of varying scale, color and form. Many of these objects are furniture, some of them are personal, some of them are art. We see them, and we like them, perhaps they even inspire us, but seldom do we think critically about their presence. As architects, we design space for them. This project designs space with them.

Since beginning this program I have sustained an interest in the interiors of buildings - for their softness, their uninhibited use of color, and their close interactions with people. This thesis is a design for the space between two walls. The site, 22 feet wide, exists between two typical brownstones in Brooklyn, with party walls on either side. The walls form a container, and the objects are arranged within it.

Architects like objects. We delight in their presence in our studios, in our drawings, and in our cities. We place them on desks and streets.

We hollow them out and give them scale. We clump them together in different arrangements: piles, rows, stacks. Sometimes we find them; sometimes we steal them. The good ones are situated in ideas. The best ones talk to one another. We are charmed when they feel old or reference history. We are vindicated when they feel new.

These particular objects consume space at a scale larger than furniture yet smaller than a room. They don’t apologize for the space they consume. They are your things. This is your home. There is nowhere else to put them.

Each is a unique combination of material, color, and form. Some are familiar, like the tables IKEA is famous for selling, or the yellow velvet sofa that belonged to your grandfather, or a piece of architectural ornament you saw once in a magazine. They are designed in collections, never alone, organized by their similarities.

I would be lying if I said that these objects were not highly controlled. I designed and made each one of them. I threw away the ones I didn’t like. Nothing about this is accidental. They are not for everyone. Some people want other things.

George Carlin described a house as “just a pile of stuff with a cover on it.” This is a house. It is comprised of some stuff, arranged to make a space.
SOMEONE FROM SKIDMORE OWINGS AND MERRILL CALLED ME A DECORATOR
The title of my Branner is House/Museum.

Along with the other Branner recipients, I’d like to say that I’m extremely grateful for this opportunity. I proposed a trip that was honestly a list of all of the buildings I most wanted to visit, and I can’t understate the degree to which the research and the trip has impacted my growth as a designer. So thank you.

Hiding in the photographs of studied canonical houses are human sized objects of varying color, style, and form. Many of these objects are furniture, some of them are personal, some of them are art. We see them, and we like them, perhaps they even inspire us, but seldom do we think critically about their presence.

Domestic life is marked by a collection of objects. Whether practical, beautiful, or neither - every house is a museum for the things owned and consumed by the people who live in it. As the comedian George Carlin describes, a house is just a pile of stuff with a cover on it. The objective of my Branner proposal was to visit and study house museums, as buildings that rely on the curation and arrangement of interior objects. Houses are arguably the building type most associated with an interior arrangement of things, the museum is another, and the house museum is therefore the ultimate example.

When I planned for this trip, I expected by the end to make a conclusion about how furniture and other interior objects effect the way we read and experience domestic spaces. By studying these places in person, as the Branner allowed, I hoped to come to a single conclusion about how the curation and representation of furniture effected one’s perception of space. My success in this regard was, however, limited, as each site told a different story, all worth knowing and studying, none of which produced the same conclusion.

For John Soane, in his house in London, the arrangement of space is based on an arrangement of collections of objects. Rooms are defined by a collection, not a set of walls, and the house is a collection of these rooms.

For William Morris, the interior of the Red House was an ongoing creative project, where murals were painted and furniture was constructed during the time of occupation. The interior was a experiment for a new kind of domesticity.

For Ray and Charles Eames, case study house no. 8 was a stage for the objects they designed and collected. The arrangement of the things they owned was as significant as the arrangement of the kit of parts that the house is constructed from.

For Gerrit Rietveld the interior of the Schroder house is continuous with the exterior. The parts that make up both are dynamic in their ability to be rearranged. It would be impossible to study one without the other.

Thanks to the generous support of the Branners I was able to visit all of these houses and others, but due to the short nature of this talk, I have chosen to focus on just three: Eileen Gray's house on Cap Martin, named and known as E-1027, Pierre Koenig’s house for the Stahl family in Los Angeles, and Mies van der Rohe’s house for Edith Farnsworth in Plano, Illinois, just outside of Chicago.

So I begin with Eileen Gray’s house, which opened very recently as a museum, so recently in fact that it opened after I received the Branner, and I reorganized my trip to include a departure to the South of France.

Eileen Gray began her career as an interior designer and gallery owner and would go on to be known as both a designer of objects and buildings. In 1924 she purchased a plot of land on the coast of France with her then partner, Jean Badovici, where they jointly designed and built the vacation home they called, E-1027, which was a combination of their initials, the numbers standing for letters in the alphabet. This was Eileen Gray’s first built work. This is a view standing on the porch of the house overlooking the Mediterranean.

The house was finished in 1929, and in the same year Badovici published an exchange with Gray, titled “From Eclecticism to Doubt” in which Gray says that she understood functionalism as a design concept, but that she tended more toward sensitivity and poetry. Perhaps this marks the difference between this house and other modernist homes of the same period.

Like many other well-known modernist homes, E-1027 embraces a nautical design sensibility. Much of the furniture is mobile, specified only to an area of the house, and would frequently move from interior to the exterior. That said, much of the furniture in this house is also built in, blurring the lines between what is architecture and what is furniture.

Corbusier in the years of Eileen Gray’s absence from E-1027, painted several murals, for which Gray did not approve. She called the murals acts of vandalism and upon finding out stated this: “Architecture must be its own decoration. The interplay of lines and colors must be such, and correspond so precisely to the demands of the interior atmosphere, that any separate painting, any picture, would appear not only unnecessary but detrimental to the harmony of the whole.”

And so I made a drawing...By putting the furniture and other objects in a drawing, erasing the building, and giving it a title “E-1027” same as the house, the drawing has a purpose, which is to say, the concepts are latent in the furniture, and are not reliant on the architecture. Drawings work to highlight some aspects of a thing while suppressing others. Drawings fill the visual space that architects consume, perhaps more than any other form of
representation, and so the drawing becomes a way of saying, look at the furniture.

Eileen Gray began her career selling furniture in a gallery, then built a house for her designs, which would eventually be restored as a museum encompassing all of her aesthetic sensibilities. What I love about E-1027 is how fittingly it encapsulates Gray’s talents and desires.

I also visited the small log cabin that Corbusier built in 1952, on the property directly next to E-1027, years after Eileen Gray had left. The cabin is only 16 square meters in area, and is based on Corbusier’s idea of the modular and a minimum living space. Corbusier spent a fair amount of time here and The Mediterranean Sea below was the place of his death in 1965.

This is a picture of the interior, which was rather difficult to photograph. 16 square meters is pretty small.

I went to the beach the following day and took this photo of the house from below. It’s rather small but you can see it there.

And this picture was taken from the same location standing in the water looking towards the beach at Casa del Mare, which was a house built at the beginning of the century by the architect, Hans-Georg Tersling, and it gives you some idea of who Eileen Gray’s neighbors were when she built the home.

The next house I’ll talk about is the Farnsworth House. The history of the Farnsworth house is one of an architect and a client. Edith Farnsworth was a highly educated and prominent doctor in Chicago, and Mies van der Rohe was a German-American architect racing to build the first glass house. There is a theory of failed romance between Edith and Mies, which is repeatedly reported, but impossible to confirm.

When we think of the house, we think of an exposed and fully visible structure and an immaculate domestic condition. For Edith the arrangement of furniture was a serious problem. Everything was on display. She complained to Mies that she didn’t even have a place to hang a dress.

She kept her kitchen trash, not under the kitchen sink, but in the closet, so no one would see it.

The narrative that the Farnsworth house promotes is pristine, and the furniture we see in it today fits that narrative. What we see today was designed for the most part by Mies van der Rohe, but in the years following its completion, the house, as it was decorated by Edith, looked shockingly different. Seeking revenge for the degree to which the house exceeded her budget, Edith replaced curtains with blinds, and furnished the space with antiques.

In 1972 a British art collector Peter Palumbo purchased the property from Farnsworth and restored the house to how Mies had envisioned it, furnishing it with almost entirely Miesian designs. He then sold the house to the National Trust in 2003, and they have maintained the house as a museum ever since.

And so the drawing of this house depicts the interior as we recognize it today, ordered, practically empty, and entirely in Mies’s vision. The Farnsworth house is perfect in photographs. It functions flawlessly as a museum, and duplicates the precision of a drawing, yet it was hardly functional. The image is what sustains, and so the drawing strives to reflect that image.

This is the last house I’ll talk about. The Stahl House was built in 1959, as case study house #22, and was made famous by Julius Schulman’s photograph in 1960, which you are looking at now.

So if Eileen Gray’s house belonged to the designer, and the Farnsworth house struggled to belong to the designer, then the Stahl house is even further removed, from both the designer and it’s inhabitants. This is a house we see almost entirely as images constructed absent of anyone who has ever lived there. The house as it exists as a museum today, also currently operates as...a Design Within Reach Store. All of the furniture and objects in the house, with the exception of one bathroom, belong to and are sold by Design Within Reach.

The tour guide, who was also the contractor for the site, apologized at the beginning of our tour for being disoriented. Apparently all of the furniture had been switched out the day before, and he didn’t recognize anything.

The image of this house is constantly adapting. Films, paintings, photographs all give the house with a romantic image of a lifestyle. The true story is uninteresting when compared to the fairytale that artists and retailers can make of it.

The drawing I made of the Stahl house is just as I saw it on my visit, both a symbol of modern living and a design within reach store. You’ve got the Eames house bird, an Eero Saarinen marble dining table, Frank Gehry’s twist cube, a womb chair, an egg chair, everything.

Whether the architecture was designed with the intention of containing specific furniture, or whether the furniture we associate with a house is honest about its use or intention, it doesn’t really matter because there’s only one way we look at it now, through the images we consume and the museum environments curated to match our expectations. The house museum is no longer the house. Our understanding of a design is shaped by the building’s existence as museum and the representations that accompany it.

Thank you.
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