

GENNARO POSTIGLIONE

THE ARCHITECT'S HOME



TASCHEN

GENERAL EDITOR

GENNARO POSTIGLIONE

WITH **FRANCESCA ACERBONI,
ANDREA CANZIANI,
LORENZA COMINO,
CLAUDIA ZANLUNGO**

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one hundred houses for one hundred european architects of the 20th century

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Architects' Houses

DOMESTIC INTERIORS AND CULTURAL PRAXIS

Because of its private and intimate character, the interior has never attracted much attention. This low level of interest can perhaps be accounted for in terms of the short-lived nature of interiors. Private fittings and furnishings are tied to the necessity of meeting the current, subjective, specific and thus fugitive and changeable needs of the occupants. Criticism of architecture, by contrast, seeks to identify permanent manifestations of general and collective values, of a kind such as architecture can comprehensively include and harmonise¹, and does not recognise in the private space any values specific to the field. This criticism does not count the peculiar features of the interior, its constituent features, or its compositional principles – in short, everything that distinguishes the interior from other spaces and lends it an autonomous nature.

If, however, we examine the issues involved in the establishment of domestic space, the questions that arise time and again are those concerning relations between the public and the private, the collective and the individual, the spectacular and the intimate. There is no doubt that the private has always existed, since in every age there has been at least one zone protected from the intrusive gaze of strangers, an area reserved for more personal and intimate activities, even if its boundaries have been variously demarcated according to period and culture. It is this circumstance that constitutes the true foundation for inquiry into the nature of domestic space.² What follows in the present book is not an exhaustive presentation of individual works by a certain number of architects, but it does afford a hitherto unpublished, “transnational” panorama that differs substantially from what readers will encounter when leafing through the usual histories of architecture.³

This project, which showcases the residences of some of the most significant twentieth century European architects, aims not only to make visible an aspect of our culture that has hitherto been neglected by scholars, and to promote a public esteem and valuation of this cultural property, but also, ambitiously, to help assure the preservation of this shared international heritage.

The fact that it is indeed a shared international heritage, despite the location of the houses in specific places and thus their positions in specific national identities, is impressively documented in the present publication. The residences selected here reflect a new, transnational, intercultural dimension, in which mutual influences and thematic absorptions

can be seen clearly prevailing over national traditions. The manifold network of connections linking the lives of these architects enriches their homes and affords concrete proof of the impossibility of confining a cultural praxis such as interior architecture within fixed geographic boundaries.

A further concern of this book is to liberate architecture from its function as a utility and to highlight its quality as a “hybrid cultural praxis”. Its argument, presented to a wide public not consisting only of specialists, is that the private space is distinctly capable of absorbing cultural development. If we are better to understand the cultural and political frame of influence around the history of architecture, and to comprehend the ongoing interchange of thoughts, ideas and values that has been the hallmark of the modern era, we must of necessity take a close look at the houses architects have created for themselves. This is no act of voyeurism, nor any kind of intrusion into the private sphere.

Private spaces not only reflect the manifold living requirements of a particular time, they are also invariably both the transmitter and receiver of influences, styles and crossovers. In examining them, we are able to place the fashioning of interior spaces in a larger context, one that transcends the national boundaries within which that context has

1 Cf. P. Thornton, *Authentic Décor. The Domestic Interior: 1620–1920*, London, 1985

2 Cf. N. Flora, P. Giardiello, G. Postiglione, ‘L’Impianto spaziale’, in M. Vaudetti (ed.), *Manuale di ristrutturazione e rinnovo degli ambienti*, UTET, 1999

3 The present publication includes the work done by the MEAM Net research group at the Politecnico di Milano in collaboration with 27 institutions Europe-wide. This work, titled ‘One Hundred Houses for One Hundred European Architects of the 20th Century’, bore fruit in a travelling exhibition and a website (<http://www.meamnet.polimi.it>).

"A GOOD HOUSE IS A HOUSE IN WHICH ONE CAN LIVE WELL."

ADRIANO CORNOLDI

taken on concrete form. Our argument does not merely propose rolling back the borders (from the national to the European), however; it questions the very concept of borders and confines. If discourse is thus shifted from the political to the cultural level, the border becomes of necessity a fluid zone incapable of clear definition. What results is a hybrid space full of combinations, a space that allows for the emergence of a network of relations, processes of exchange, borrowing and mutation, which is not always recognised for what it is.⁴

To reflect upon the transnational dimension of cultural practices, especially in architecture, implies opening up private space to the unfamiliar. This brings consequences with it. As Iain Chambers has emphasised, the house is located "in traffic" in a twofold sense: doors and windows not only afford points of contact with the outside world, but also constitute those routes of communication by which what is alien, other, or different, can come in and people the domestic scene⁵. The irruption of the alien into the familiar area signifies the meeting of "what is of the home and what is not, what is familiar and what is not"⁶. This disrupts that positivist trust that is founded on the dialectic of opposites, and the concepts of authenticity and of unspoilt communities, on which occidental civilisation has built the organisation of its knowledge and its traditions, are undermined.

The transnational character of interior architecture, and its significance as a hybrid cultural praxis, has been expounded by Chambers as follows: "The journey back into one's tradition, just as the journey outwards towards another, is perhaps an altogether more fragile and fractured operation than our history and culture would have us believe. ... No tradition exists in isolation, it invariably cites/sites others."⁷ This statement invites a new scrutiny of the interior of the house, the seemingly inviolable threshold of the private sphere⁸, and demands that assessments of the built product be revised. The status of the domestic interior needs liberating from the subordinate role it has been assigned by a dominant architectural culture that has always been chiefly interested in the design of cities and of the principal buildings in them. For it is precisely the house, as a privileged place of action and exposure, that constitutes the "instrument" by means of which, as Christian Norberg-Schulz holds⁹, man perceives and orders the world around him.

The private apartment as an object of reflection and design cannot, however, be considered in direct relation to the question of the "house

and apartment for everyone" which governed the debate in European architecture in the first half of the twentieth century. Despite the thematic parallel, there are substantial differences owing to the different methodological approaches and aims. On the one hand, a process of definition, dimensioning and standardisation of requirements produced goals (in terms of rooms, fittings and furnishings) that aimed at the democratic distribution of resources (the house for everyone). On the other hand, interest in the apartment interior was always determined by the quest for comprehensive criteria which, regardless of forms and architectural idioms that had already been codified, would give to interior spaces that warm quality of comfort that renders a house a place of snug security, indeed makes a house a home.¹⁰

Moreover, the culture of interior spaces has all too often been equated with the history of architecture or of interior architecture. This involves a failure to grasp that the distinctive characteristic of domestic space consists precisely in transcending the historical facts of both, without being the product of their conjunction.

Although the evolution of the interior is intimately connected with the history of architecture – and with that of interior architecture, to which the interior belongs – it also has a distinctive individual character of its own. This individuality is manifested in the combination of forms and gestalts in the constituent elements that determine the nature of the

4 H. K. Bhabha, 'The Third Space' in J. Rutherford (ed.), *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, London, 1990, pp. 211–215.

5 Cf. I. Chambers, 'Le fondamenta disturbate e il linguaggio degli habitat infestati dai fantasmi', paper presented to the international conference 'One Hundred Houses for One Hundred European Architects of the 20th Century', October 2001, Milan Triennale

6 Cf. S. Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trs. James Strachey, vol. XVII, London, 1953, pp. 219–252

7 I. Chambers, 'Tradition, Transcription, Translation and Transit', in *AREA* 51, July/August 2000, p. 3

8 Cf. W. Rybczynski, *Home. A Short History of an Idea*, New York, 1987

9 Cf. C. Norberg-Schulz, *Dwelling*, London, 1986

10 Cf. F. Alison, F. Ll. Wright, *Designer of Furniture*, Naples, 1997

living place, including essential fittings and furnishings. The spaces are bound up with the lives, requirements and wishes of the people who have conceived and then realised them.¹¹ This relation of the form of the interior space to the life conducted in it is a fundamental feature. And for this reason it is impossible to assess the significance of the forms without taking the occupants, and their needs and sensibilities, into account.¹² An architect who designs a house or even simply its interior is taking on a delicate assignment that requires him to relate various kinds of information one to another, and to harmonise them. He translates them into a constructed form, in the hope of establishing the subtle and difficult synthesis of form and life.¹³

In the specific case of architects' houses, we can furthermore identify a "more sturdy relation between occupant and dwelling ... which allows us to determine the real, actual intention prevailing in the organisation of the daily living space and the private work space. That this applies not only in the case of architects, however, is evidenced by examples such as Pablo Neruda's apartments in Santiago and Valparaíso, Gabriele d'Annunzio's Villa Vittoriale in Gardone Riviera, Hearst Castle in San Simeon, or the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston."¹⁴

As sites, architects' houses always engage two lines of interest: they are works, and they afford biographical testimony to their creators.¹⁵ Insofar as this is so, the anthropological interest taken in cultural products in architects' houses is a fit area of research. One must concur with Adriano Cornoldi: "The study of residences designed by architects for themselves shows that, from the very core, the designs pursue an aim that ranges across a richly nuanced spectrum from a condition of absolute involvement to one of the utmost detachment. That aim may be to do with making a statement, one that leads to the building of a residence of one's own, free of anyone else's intentions, much in the spirit of a poetic manifesto. For Eliel Saarinen, Gerrit Rietveld, Robert Mallet-Stevens, Günther Domenig it is the statement of a new idiom; many use it to bring word of a new life style, be it one that prompts enthusiasm, as in Joseph Maria Olbrich or Konstantin Melnikov; be it one at once more free and more composed, as in Luigi Figini or André Lurçat; or be it a more down-to-basics style, as in Clemens Holzmeister or Ralph Erskine. For Jean Prouvé, Angelo Invernizzi and Arne Korsmo it is the 'unique' opportunity for a technological experiment. Auguste Perret's venture is a demonstration of entrepreneurial daring. The sheer pleasure of dwelling is particularly expressed in the apartments of Erik Willem Bryggman,

Umberto Riva and Enric Miralles and in the houses of Gunnar Asplund, Daniele Calabi, Alvar Aalto, Juan Navarro Baldeweg and Marie José Van Hee."¹⁶

One can add that in houses of such uniqueness, the architectural achievement is by no means at odds with the occupants. Unlike cases of cautious quest or of free experimentation, architecture is here invariably deployed as a means, not an end. The resolve to place praxis and theoretical speculation at the service of man and his requirements by no means issues in banality of the form or content of the architectural work, but rather in its further evolution. The needs and expectations of the occupants are satisfied without robbing innovative drive of its verve.

Alas, this happy union of private requirement and architectural ambition is increasingly being forfeited, as we see in publications where the visual realm of the interiors coincides with the will of the designers. They confirm the hegemony of objects over people, presenting to the public vacuous models of living bereft of meaning.

The present compilation intends, with resolve and perhaps just a little presumption as well, to supply the legitimation for the very existence of a theory and poetics of interior design that proposes practicable solutions. The object is to promote understanding of architecture that pays regard both to the occupants and to the ideas of the designers.

11 Cf. G. Teyssot (ed.), *Il progetto domestico. La casa dell'uomo: archetipi e prototipi*, catalogue of the XVII. Milan Triennale, Milan, 1986

12 Cf. A. Cornoldi, *L'architettura dei luoghi domestici*, Milan, 1994, p. 20

13 Cf. G. Ottolini (ed.), *Civiltà dell'abitare*, Cantù, 1997

14 Cf. M. Boriani, 'Le case degli architetti. Conservazione, restauro e ricostruzione?', paper presented to the international conference 'One Hundred Houses for One Hundred European Architects of the 20th Century', October 2001, Milan Triennale

15 Cf. W. Rybczynski, *The Most Beautiful House in the World*, New York and London, 1989

16 A. Cornoldi, 'Le case degli architetti', paper presented to the international conference 'One Hundred Houses for One Hundred European Architects of the 20th Century', October 2001, Milan Triennale



The landscape of the interior is determined and characterised by objects that satisfy the needs and expectations of the occupants. It is these objects that make a space into a room.¹⁷ A house without objects is an empty house, incapable of accommodating life. "That is the message conveyed by the interiors of the houses of Peter Behrens or Josef Plečnik, of Vittoriano Viganò or Franco Albini, of Carlo Mollino or Ignazio Gardella. The 'beauty' of the furnishings and objects may be relative, and subjective, but they are no less significant for that: it is precisely the absence of these things that is the hallmark of a prison cell."¹⁸ Maurizio Boriani observes: "The sturdy relation that obtains between the spaces, the objects, and their meanings, is known only to the occupants and frequently not even by them, since a part is played by psychological considerations that are not always clear but indeed must sometimes be unconsciously sidelined."¹⁹

The fittings and furnishings bear silent witness to the act of living, and it is thanks to them that the occupants are able to enjoy rooms that were empty when the house was as yet uninhabited. The fittings and furnishings are true settlers: together with the objects that enter the interior of a dwelling when one takes possession of it, they transform spaces into locations that are in readiness for life.²⁰ "The distinctive character of the objects and furnishings in a house, their disposition in the rooms, their associations with each other, strong or less so, the order (or dis-order) in which people live in a house, can express a person's personality as well as a letter, a work of art, or social behaviour."²¹

To a particular degree, houses or apartments designed by architects for themselves are places of exchange and of cultural production. They not only afford an opportunity to observe how the relation between built form and the act of living has been established; they additionally elucidate a historical legacy that has hitherto remained almost entirely in the dark. Seen thus, the architect is not only a man of technology, professionally deploying a specialised form of expression within a defined field of operation, but is an intellectual who, like a writer, musician or any other artist, interprets communicable cultural values.²²

If we are successfully persuasive in arguing that the significance of architects' houses lies in their high cultural value, and thus helping them toward the recognition they merit, the fraught question of how they can possibly be preserved immediately arises. The notion of some sort of museum preservation does indeed seem the only option for a heritage subject to constant wear and tear.²³ Boriani is thinking along similar

lines when he writes: "In this case, preservation must be understood as the attempt to forestall dereliction and the associated loss of memory, by eliminating the factors that cause or accelerate it; in the full knowledge that any and every object we preserve for posterity can be nothing but an approximation to the original, even if it is our task to assure for the future the greatest possible use of the object (and hence also the greatest possible understanding of it)."²⁴

Though the processes of preservation and restoration involved in architects' houses do not fundamentally differ from those other buildings require, the buildings do pose additional problems. The technical and structural aspects need to be taken adequately into consideration. Boriani comments: "Among the questions raised by the preservation of modern architecture, that of the materials and the experimental building techniques is one that occasions considerable problems. ... The 'test houses' in particular (frequently the residences of the architects and artists) merit preserving in their original state, in order to document the structural ventures, whether successful or not, even if this involves a lower level of functionality measured by today's standards."²⁵

A further consideration is that architects' houses and apartments, as privileged locations of the private sphere, are not necessarily capable of transformation into public spaces. Even so, the number of houses adapted to a new museum role is growing constantly, and some already

17 G. Ottolini, V. del Prizio, *La casa attrezzata*, Naples, 1993

18 A. Cornoldi, 'Le case degli architetti', ebd.

19 Cf. M. Boriani, 'Le case degli architetti. Conservazione, restauro e ricostruzione?', ebd.
Cf. J. Baudrillard, *Le système des objets*, Paris, 1968

21 Cf. M. Boriani, 'Le case degli architetti. Conservazione, restauro e ricostruzione?', ebd.

22 Cf. G. Bachelard, *La poétique de l'espace*, Paris, 1970

23 F. Drugman, 'Imparare dalla casa', in F. di Valerio (ed.), *Contesto e identità*, Bologna, 2001

24 Cf. M. Boriani, 'Le case degli architetti. Conservazione, restauro e ricostruzione?', ebd.
25 Ebd.

serve as benchmarks, such as Pierre Chareau's Maison de Verre in Paris or Frank Lloyd Wright's house in Chicago²⁶. These examples point up a difficult compromise, in the attempt to pursue restoration within existing parameters and regulations whilst at the same time following the unusual desire not to transform the dwelling into a "museum", in so far as the domestic character that sets it apart from other objects and defines it as a place of living and culture is to be preserved²⁷.

In raising the question of the museum character of dwellings, we are again foregrounding cultural discourse. In the course of history, the endeavour to give rhetorical embodiment to the power of knowledge has led the design of museums into an ongoing process by which frontiers are transgressed and purposes modified. This has gone hand in hand with that other process by which, over centuries, access has been extended from a privileged group of users to the broad masses.²⁸ Despite the greater permeability of their boundaries, and the change in their roles, museums still adhere to architecture as a display of public power. They have become places where a governance obtains that does not exclude but, rather, is based on a national identity in which any individual can recognise himself.²⁹ In this sense, the museum is indeed the institutional location where the occidental memory is given representative display, especially the memory of the social group that produced it – affording a precise image of the dominant culture.

The present publication wishes to endorse a different identity for museums. Our approach adopts a spirit cognate with that of Marie Louise Pratt's³⁰ idea of the "contact zone", that place where people separate from each other geographically and historically make contact by entering into mutual, interactive relations. In this spirit, realising an architectural network by transforming twentieth century European architects' houses into museums constitutes a true challenge for the future.

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26 Ebd.

27 Cf. A. Cornoldi, *Le case degli architetti. Dizionario privato dal Rinascimento ad oggi*, Venice, 2001

28 Cf. T. Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, London and New York, 1995

29 Cf. J. Karp, D. Lavine (eds.), *Exhibiting Cultures*, Washington, 1992

30 Cf. M. L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London and New York, 1991