

What Do Houses Want?

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Abstract

In his book *What Do Pictures Want?*, W.J.T. Mitchell questions our apparent double consciousness when it comes to images: “How is it, in other words, that people are able to maintain a ‘double consciousness’ toward images, pictures, and representations in a variety of media, vacillating between magical beliefs and skeptical doubts, naïve animism and hardheaded materialism, mystical and critical attitudes?” In this essay, I will apply the main tenet of Mitchell’s query to an examination of the figure of the house, viewing it as a being in its own right. Paraphrasing historian Neil Harris, Mitchell writes: “we often talk about buildings as if they were living things, or as if their intimate proximity to living beings made them take on some of the vitality of their inhabitants,” and with what type of building do we live more closely, more intimately, than our houses, our homes? Therefore, for the purposes of this essay, I will dare to speak to houses and ask them what they want. I will look at a few examples of houses from literature, cinema, and architecture history: the house built by Ludwig Wittgenstein, the house at Neauphle-le-Château in the film *Nathalie Granger* by Marguerite Duras, the blue house in *Maude* by Suzanne Jacob, and E.1027 by architect Eileen Gray. I hope that an in depth exploration of these unique domestic spaces will reveal the possibility to understand spaces as individuals, and provide insight into the desires of all houses.

Keywords

Architecture, houses, desire, W.J.T. Mitchell.

House A house Home
In a certain space it is good to sleep.
In another it is good to dine or be with others.
The serving spaces and the free spaces combine and are
placed to the garden or to the street to suggest their use.
House implies a place good also for another. It is that
quality which is close to architecture.
It reflects a way of life.
It does not make small spaces for small people.
Spaces transcend function.
A House is more specific.

— Louis Kahn

In his book *What Do Pictures Want?* W.J.T. Mitchell questions our apparent double consciousness when it comes to images when he writes: “How is it, in other words, that people are able to maintain a ‘double consciousness’ toward images, pictures, and representations in a variety of media, vacillating between magical beliefs and skeptical doubts, naïve animism and hardheaded materialism, mystical and critical attitudes?”¹ Mitchell goes to great lengths to justify his right to question the desires of images. He admits that the “living image” is somewhat of a trope with undertones of animism, vitalism, and anthropomorphism, and that the question “what do pictures want?” itself may seem silly or impossible. Yet the link between images and living things still seems inescapable, timeless, even necessary. Mitchell also suggests a subaltern model of pictures as a means of introducing the dialectics of power and desire. By asking what images desire, Mitchell is investigating not only their wants, but also their shortcomings, and further, what we desire from them. Following Mitchell’s lead, in this essay I allow myself to examine the desires of houses in order to examine the exceptional relationships we construct with our everyday architecture.

In their dealings with buildings, people seem to evince a deep-rooted tendency to attribute vital qualities to passive structures. This is evidenced by the abundance of popular imagery and the common terminology used to describe and acknowledge our built environments, as well as by the rituals that celebrate or commemorate them. In this essay, I will take a step back from the usual attitude that architecture is unambiguously a product of the architect’s ambition and imagination. By entering into a dialogue with architecture, I will attempt to approach the figure of the house

as a being in its own right, a being imbued with attitude, agency, and desires.

In his book *Building Lives*, historian Neil Harris associates notable elements of the human life cycle with stages in the lives of public buildings: the groundbreaking is like a baby shower, the laying of the cornerstone is like a christening, the opening is like a graduation, etc. This may seem like an easy juxtaposition (and I must admit that I am oversimplifying his arguments quite a bit for the sake of expediency), but it does show how as a society we have chosen not to overlook the real lives of buildings and, instead, to commemorate them as we do our own. Following Harris' claim that buildings are born, named, and presented like debutantes, Mitchell adds details about the rest of their lives: "As they [buildings] age they become, like persons, shabby and disreputable, or eminent and distinguished. When they are abandoned, they are haunted by the ghosts of those who once dwelt in them, and are shunned like a corpse from which the soul has departed; when they are destroyed, they leave ghostly replicas in memory and other media."² Mitchell uses Harris' analogy between the life of a person and the life of a building to help bridge the gap between pictures and animate beings, and to rationalize his claim that images should be asked what they want. Mitchell asks: "[H]ow do pictures resemble life-forms? Are they born? Can they die? Can they be killed?"³

As Harris' argument is concerned with public buildings and monuments, it cannot necessarily be simply extended to a discussion of houses, my subject in this paper. Domestic architecture, it is true, does not nowadays lend itself to the plethora of building rituals mentioned above. This is because, as Harris explains, people rarely build their own homes, many people rent, and most will live in many different houses throughout their lives. However, paraphrasing Harris, Mitchell writes: "we often talk about buildings as if they were living things, or as if their intimate proximity to living beings made them take on some of the vitality of their inhabitants,"⁴ and with what type of building do we live more closely, more intimately, than our houses, our homes? Therefore, for the purposes of this essay, I will dare to speak to houses and ask them what they want.

I will use the postulates of Mitchell, Harris, and Aaron Betsky as the basis for my examination in order to specify the close connections, both physical and emotional, between our bodies and our everyday architecture, with the goal of generating a new awareness of our relationship with our built environment. I will

combine spatial theory, material culture, and feminist theory to show how a close reading of domestic space can reveal historical models of inequity that still permeate our attitudes and actions. By speculating on the desires of houses, I wish to convey the importance of the bond between our vernacular domestic architecture and our popular culture, our fictions, and our real lives—thus revealing how a better understanding of the places we live in can help us to establish new knowledge of our own relationships and desires.

“All building is necessarily an act against nature,” writes Joseph Rykwert in *Idea of a Town*.⁵ The shift from nomadism to sedentary living is an act that divides nature from culture. Permanent building sets up a wall that traces a line dividing inside and out, and as such, the elemental division between public and private. Accompanying this initial divide comes the separation between the sexes: men on the outside, women on the inside. According to architect, critic, and curator Aaron Betsky, the architectural division between outside and inside, public and private, mirrors a division between the sexes that originates with the human body:

The architecture of the body would thus seem to determine not just what we look like but how we behave and, ultimately, our place in the world. This argument has been the bedrock of all sexual division in our society. The woman’s body is an inside that nurtures and protects. It is like a house, and therefore, women stay at home. A man’s body is a weapon, a coupling device, an object that completes itself outside itself. It is a temple. It projects its symmetrical, vertical orders over the world and impregnates.⁶

Domestic space today continues to have strong associations with comfort, privacy, intimacy, security, family, purity, withdrawal, separation, memory, childhood, learning, and community. This primordial relegation of the house to the woman’s domain, through the so-called logic of the body-architecture relationship, has diminished through time but still participates in our social construction of the figure of the woman and mother, as well as our understanding of the house as feminine.

In his analysis of images, Mitchell builds his reading of what images want through the figure of the subaltern. He advances: “the construal of pictures not as sovereign subjects or disembodied spirits but as subalterns whose bodies are marked with the

stigmas of difference, and who function both as 'go-betweens' and scapegoats in the social field of human visibility."⁷ Similarly, I would propose that a subaltern model of the house could reveal something of the hidden potential of buildings to act as individuals, to influence change, and to exert authority just as "[t]he subaltern model of the picture [...] opens up the actual dialectics of power and desire in our relations with pictures."⁸ In this essay, I will look at a few examples of houses from literature, cinema, and architectural history, in order to decipher the often quiet, always elusive voice of domestic architecture and its particular desires: the house built by Ludwig Wittgenstein in Vienna, the house at Neauphle-le-Château in the film *Nathalie Granger* by Marguerite Duras, the blue house in *Maude* by Suzanne Jacob, and E.1027 by architect Eileen Gray. While fiction allows for the kind of narrative constructions and personification of the house that I am interested in, I think the houses from the factual world also will have a lot to say. I hope that an in-depth exploration of these unique domestic spaces will reveal the possibility of understanding spaces as individuals, and provide insight into the desires of houses.

The Wittgenstein House, Ludwig Wittgenstein

Situated in Vienna III, Kundmannngasse 19, the *Palais Stonborough* was completed in 1928 and is the only example of architecture by Austrian-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951). A singular example of 20th century domestic architecture, the house that Wittgenstein built is nonetheless distinct both visually and theoretically from the contemporaneous types of modern architecture being produced at that time, such as that of Adolf Loos or Mies van der Rohe.⁹ After its completion, Wittgenstein's house received little recognition and further, even condemnation from the architecture community and complete disinterest from the Austrian government as to its preservation. From 1969 to 1971, architecture historian Bernard Leitner spearheaded a movement to save the house from demolition and organized a movement to have the house designated as a historical landmark in an impassioned battle to finally bring recognition and distinction to the architecture of Wittgenstein's house.

Attempts to understand the Wittgenstein house have often led critics to assume a direct relation between Wittgenstein's philosophic investigations and the realization of the architecture, as they would be predisposed to do when comparing an architect's writings with their buildings. However, in this case, Leitner warns against such attempts, which are misleading: "Architecture cannot be applied philosophy. Only a clichéd misunderstanding can refer

to this multi-layered, complex art of architecture as 'logic translated into a house' [...]. Wittgenstein's architecture must be read and understood in the language of architecture. It should not be treated as philosophy translated into a building or as applied thought."¹⁰ In a further note Leitner writes: "Wittgenstein's architecture cannot be deduced from his writings. His intention is manifest in the building. The process leading to art is not reversible."¹¹ Wittgenstein was a philosopher of logic and language, and so it is indeed appropriate to decipher and to speak of architecture in the proper language of architecture. The house's desires are made manifest spatially and reveal themselves through its architecture, separate from Wittgenstein's written words. Even though the house was brought into being by Wittgenstein's will and design, in order to fully understand the specific power of this building it is important to look at its own life, beyond its philosophical beginnings.

The house was originally commissioned by Wittgenstein's sister, Margarethe Stonborough, to Paul Engleman, an architect friend of her brother. Stonborough wanted a home that would embrace her culture and lifestyle, and the composition of the plan reflected her involvement in the design process: "Her program of spaces can be clearly read in the very first sketches: representative rooms for entertaining, music, dining, library and, characteristically, a terrace in front of those spaces with tall window-doors. She knew what she wanted."¹² Engleman, unsure that he understood the details of Stonborough's expectations, conferred with Wittgenstein and soon after yielded all control of the design to his friend. Wittgenstein was personally very invested in the project, as evidenced by his possessive wording in various letters from 1927 and 1928: "My house," "My building," "What I had to demand..."¹³ The idea of the house then, was born of Margarethe Stonborough, introduced by Paul Engleman, and delivered by Ludwig Wittgenstein. Stonborough had specific programmatic wants and her philosopher-brother used his time as an architect to explore the physical language of building, creating a unique and rational building that reflected his own pursuits. Leitner writes: "Wittgenstein built a different kind of privacy. This is not a question of taste but rather one of attitude. This attitude becomes evident in the sense of space of the individual rooms, in the tightly woven spatial connections, in material, color and details. In Wittgenstein's architecture one cannot be separated from the other. Everything determines everything else."¹⁴ Wittgenstein's personal investment gave form to a house that comes to life through time and with movement; its particular attitude is composed of subtle shifts in the proportions of the rooms and in the sequencing of space. Geometrically and conceptually, everything is connected.

Once built, the house stayed a private affair. It emanated a different kind of comfort, a new kind of privacy. It was made expensively and showcased artificial materials, primarily metal and glass. It was a discrete individual, yet falsely modest in its sparseness and its appearance of extreme simplicity. It knew that it was different from the other, modern houses, but didn't try to impose itself, explain or justify itself. The house invites you in, and without indicating clearly a sense of primary direction; it then lets you choose your way: "the hall [has an] ambivalent character, namely that of a directional/non-directional joint-like center."¹⁵ The house is dynamic, closed and open at once. It shows off this doubled quality again in some of the passageways where pairs of tall and slender double glass doors, either transparent, translucent, or metal, separate inside from outside, without sealing off either space completely. The house is elegant and secretive. The place between the two doors is fleeting; this "joint" becomes its own space when the doors are open, and can disappear back into the house at a moment's notice. The doubling of doors allows each room to have a character of its own; you are invited to stay or to transition if only one pair or both is left open: "These are two gestures pointing in opposite directions: leaving a space and entering a space."¹⁶ Metal doors lead to different important public or private spaces, the salon and the bedroom, suggesting a subtle sense of hierarchy, a gradation of openness to closedness, but also of restfulness because of the cold, muted color.

Even in its completeness, with its internal rationale, the house is not constricting; it thrives on movement, undefined possibilities, and in this indeterminacy, a freedom and hospitality: "And this architecture, which is independent of stylistic period, is in a sense timeless, can be furnished, inhabited, and brought to life with antiques or modern pieces—as long as their quality does justice to Wittgenstein's spaces."¹⁷ I would argue that this timeless attribute is something that can be aspired to, but not controlled by the architect. Rather, it is a quality that the house itself emanates: so long as it feels respected, it is willing and ready to adapt to anything.

So far, I've described the house as an independent being with qualities and emotions. But what of its desires? This house, more than anything, wants to be lived in. Attuned to the desires of both the client and the architect, the house flourishes, feels its best in action: "The house in motion refers to the house in use. Use is not functionality (the path between sink and stove). Use is action such as opening a door, interlocking window-doors or raising metal

curtains. Wittgenstein gives movement to form based on the laws of mechanics. In contrast to the machine aesthetics of the twenties, movement to Wittgenstein is mechanics: lever, weight, support, energy, friction.”¹⁸ The house is not an independent and disinterested entity; rather, it is an adaptable being, willing to please. It is sure of itself, with its distinct symmetries and proportions, but it craves the human touch and the thrill of new situations and new discoveries, which are only possible through interactions with loving homeowners.

Neauphle-le Château, Marguerite Duras

Nathalie Granger, a 1972 film by writer-director Marguerite Duras, is the story of two women and a house. The women (played by Lucia Bosé and Jeanne Moreau), whose relationship to each other remains undisclosed throughout, spend the day doing chores around the house while their daughters are at school. On the radio we hear the news: the police are on a manhunt for two adolescent boys on a killing spree in the area. The only physical disruption at the house is the arrival of a door-to-door washing-machine salesman, a young Gérard Depardieu. The title character is the daughter of Lucia Bosé’s character Isabelle, a disobedient young girl who has been expelled from school and might be sent to boarding school.



Video still from Nathalie Granger.

The film was set in Duras’ own house in Neauphle-le-Château, a region in the central-northern part of France. The action happens exclusively inside the domestic space, inside the house and within the grounds of the property, in the backyard. The atmosphere is intensely feminine. We follow the characters through a routine of “womanly” chores: cleaning, washing the dishes, clearing the backyard of natural debris, dredging the pond, ironing, and sewing. The house in this instance is a woman’s domain. Duras portrays the house as a character; there is an intentionality and purpose to every shot of the residence: “Duras said that her house was, in effect, her script, and she hired the acclaimed cinematographer Ghislain Cloquet to film it. His velvety black-and-white images offer views through windows and doorways, down corridors, into mirrors, and of walls and floors. Re-creating her daily existence in the old house in Neauphle-le-Château, Duras uses the apparatus of a major motion picture to make refracted home movies, as if trying to make sense of her life and surroundings.”¹⁹ Duras’ home is not only the setting for domesticity, but also a complicit feminine character amongst the cast. In a sense the house plays the part of Duras herself, equal parts instigator and bystander.

Architecture historian Aaron Betsky dates our association of domesticity with womanhood to the Middle Ages: “It is from this period that we can date the formalization of the space of women as the domestic sphere. It is the space inside, the space of domestic furnishings, the space of family relations, the space that is not recorded or represented. It is the invisible, always changing, flexible, and sometimes even comfortable space of everyday life” (Betsky 1995, 62). Women had been relegated to interior spaces and inferior positions before medieval times, but during this period, the development of guilds excluded women even from the activities of craft-making and from the production of the goods that shaped their own spaces. The connection between femininity and domesticity has not dissipated with time. The modern women of *Nathalie Granger* still find themselves excluded from the exterior world, from common notions of productivity and activity. Duras’ house is the interior space where quotidian activities take place and where families are constructed and deconstructed. There is no shame in this space; there is only fluidity, a slow passing of the day, inside the house, outside of the world.



Video still from Nathalie Granger.



Video still from Nathalie Granger.

The women in residence at Neauphle belong to that house, just as that house belongs to them. Duras imbues her characters with both a sense of presentness, of this day in this place, and of impermanence, of the space’s history and future. In her book of essays, *La Vie matérielle*, Duras speaks of her house:

J’ai pensé très longtemps à acheter une maison. Je n’ai jamais imaginé que je pourrais posséder une maison neuve. À Neauphle, la maison ça a d’abord été deux fermes bâties un peu avant la Révolution. Elle doit avoir un peu plus de deux siècles. J’y ai souvent pensé. Elle avait été là en 1789, en 1870. À la croisée des forêts de Rambouillet et de Versailles. En 1958 elle m’appartenait. J’y ai pensé jusqu’à la douleur certaines nuits. Je la voyais habitée par ces femmes. Je me voyais précédée par ces femmes dans ces mêmes chambres, dans les mêmes crépuscules. Il y avait eu neuf générations de femmes avant moi dans ces murs, beaucoup de monde, là, autour des feux, des enfants, des valets, des gardiennes de vaches. Toute la maison était lissée, frottée aux angles des portes, par le passage des corps, des enfants, des chiens.²⁰



Video still from Nathalie Granger.

She says: "J'écris sur les femmes pour écrire sur moi, sur moi seule à travers les siècles,"²¹ and so it is with her film *Nathalie Granger*. It is a story of two women, but also of the one woman Marguerite Duras, and above all the story of the house, of being in, and of living through, one's own house.

This house wants to protect. It knows it has but few defenses against the exterior world: we see all the windows; looking out of windows, we are shown the patio doors, the outside reflected in a mirror, women walking out of doors. It cannot stop the salesman from entering the house, but in this women's world, this woman's house, he breaks down and can no longer keep up his appearances of purpose. The house is quiet but not calm; it has the outside on its mind. The radio brings the world in, the threat of the outside is conveyed inside.

The Blue House, Suzanne Jacob

The 1988 novella *Maude*, by Québec writer Suzanne Jacob, follows a couple, Maude and Bruno, who live in an abandoned house on the edge of town. Bruno takes care of Maude and Maude gives Bruno a reason to keep living. He sells her drawings for money and invites people, anyone, to visit. Maude is alternatively apathetic, curious, dangerous, self-assured, dependent, free. The house and the garden were discovered by Bruno for them to live in: "When he found the house, a house on the edge of town, abandoned and open, he didn't tell her. He wandered around the wide open house. When he was sure it was abandoned, he took Maude there. At least that's what he told Maude. As soon as Maude accepts what he tells her, Bruno starts believing it, forgetting that he lied, if he lied. Maude felt at home right away in the house."²² Maude is perfectly herself inside the house: she sits on a yellow chair in the garden and she watches a lilac tree. Maude is also herself out of the house, slamming doors, dancing in town, attacking other women, visiting other men.

Maude and the house understand each other; they don't try to be anything more than what they are. This house is perfectly itself. It was left empty, at the edge of town, absolutely satisfied being on its own, and when it was found it welcomed Maude and Bruno. This house is patient, unconcerned with human transience. This house doesn't seem to want much, as it knows there is a whole other world outside of itself:

"There's more to life than walls. You can't live only inside the walls. The walls can end up sagging.

There's nothing on the walls. The walls are bare.
They're not, they're blue, says Bruno.
'Sky blue,' says Maude.
'Blue,' says Bruno. 'Blue-blue,'
'Paint blue,' says Maude."²³

Maude and the house both belong and don't belong to Bruno — he's only found them: "The house doesn't belong to anyone. There's no one there. 'We painted it all blue and now it's our home,' Bruno says. 'There is nothing to be afraid of. If the owners come back, we haven't touched anything, everything is there. We painted it blue, that's all'."²⁴ In the same way that he met Maude, he discovered the house: "He found her, this deaf woman, he undid the knots in her hair, he closed the umbrella, he found the house, open without a key, they repainted the walls, blue, blue everywhere, no, she has no right to be restless like this, no right to turn the TV up loud" (Jacob 1997, 43). Bruno is still concerned with appearances and about finding his place in the world and making a place for Maude without seeing that whichever place she's in is already hers: Maude with her blue hair in her house with the blue walls.

Domestic space, historically the space of women, is usually removed from the power-play of city planning, monumental building, and individual architectural genius that give a place its particular identity, its *place*-ness: "Women were thus deprived of their ability to enter into the plays of power because they could usually not gain access to, build, or define those forms that would identify them as something more than just a human being and instead invest them with rank, privilege, wealth, and a particular identity. Women were no place and thus were no one, at least in the grand scheme of things. Inside their no-places, however, they still lived and made a world for themselves. It was a world men often feared and thus tried to contain."²⁵ This is still Maude's space; her house is a no-place and she is a no-one. Maude seems to be the model of no-one and yet an unrivaled *someone*. This house, adaptable, tolerant and uncomplaining, while certainly a no-place, is the central place of this little drama.

***E.1027*, Eileen Gray**

High above the Mediterranean Sea at Roquebrune-Cap-Martin sits *E.1027*, a house built by Eileen Gray between 1926 and 1929. The modern white house was designed for the architect and her partner, architecture critic Jean Badovici. After Gray and Badovici leave the house, Le Corbusier proceeds to slowly occupy

the site, which he had known, visited, and esteemed. He paints murals inside *E.1027* and after the war even builds himself a house, *le cabanon*, overlooking the property. Architecture historian Beatriz Colomina has suggested that through this transgression, Le Corbusier was attempting to contain, overshadow, and ultimately efface Gray's sexuality by colonizing her architecture. In a letter to Vladimir Nekrassov from 1932, Le Corbusier writes: "Why then to paint on the walls [...] at the risk of killing architecture?"²⁶ Colomina explains: "The mural for Le Corbusier is a weapon against architecture, a bomb."²⁷ By violating architecture, and concurrently Gray herself, it seems that Le Corbusier imbues the building with a power of its own. *E.1027* is no longer simply architecture; it truly becomes Gray's surrogate. W.J.T. Mitchell describes this tendency: "Two beliefs seem to be in place when people offend images. The first is that the image is transparently and immediately linked to what it represents. Whatever is done to the image is somehow done to what it stands for. The second is that the image possesses a kind of vital, living character that makes it capable of feeling what is done to it" (Mitchell 2004, 127). Le Corbusier's actions are aimed not only at the material building, but at its very essence and even at the body of the architect herself.

What did the house do that made Le Corbusier want to enter it uninvited, want to mark it, to dominate it? Architect and researcher Katarina Bonnevier offers a new look at *E.1027* that might elucidate the mysteries and desires surrounding the house by presenting a queer reading of the space. Gray built according to modernist principles, but did not subscribe to the fundamental guideline, the strict "form follows function" directive. She did not distinguish between the traditional hierarchies of architecture and interior design; rather, "Gray was sure of her focus: 'the thing constructed has greater importance than the way one has constructed it'."²⁸ *E.1027* retained a beautiful simplicity and functionality, but every aspect was subject to the same attention and care. Furthermore, function became malleable: "The boudoir was proposed by Gray to be a multifunctional space for all aspects of life—pleasure, rest, studies, business meetings, and parties."²⁹ Uses were varied, options were multiplied, and the standard understanding of private and public were overturned: "The boudoir in her interpretation became the most public space of the building, as well as the most intimate. There is no spatial opposition between these two categories; in fact, there are no such absolute categories, rather the 'Grayian' boudoir supports a multitude of situations. [...] That which is being performed in the space, with the help of the architecture, decides what space it is."³⁰ This performativity was inherent to the design: "Gray herself said that the house had been

designed in the 'camping style,' a style of territorial impermanence, of being on the run, being mobile."³¹ Through its in-built motions, its invitation to action, the house wants to remember movement, the history of traveling houses, of nomad tents.

In the first century B.C., the Roman architectural theoretician Vitruvius published a document codifying rules of building and city planning, which came to be considered something of an "Architecture Bible."³² He proposed a theory of building arranged in proportion to the idealized male body, as well as a principle regulating the arrangement and layout of the rooms in a building according to the new standard of functionality: "By generalizing specific acts or needs, like sleeping, eating, or entertaining, the architect can tame them with reproducible form. [...] This act of arrangement finally buries or imprisons the activities of daily life and the woman who is at the heart of this."³³ These ancient rules are still the ones dominating most of today's built environment in the heterosexual matrix of architecture.³⁴

E.1027 as a whole was active: activated by alternatives, by movement, by choice, and as such it broke out from under the authority and domination of modern design as masculine: "The building as an act is ambiguous, open to interpretation, not confined within normative constraints."³⁵ Le Corbusier, with his architecture of unity and of prefabrication, may have been directly targeting this ambiguity, trying to conceal the sensuality and enigma of potentials, to remove the narrative inherent in *E.1027* in order to replace it with his static forms and figurative sketches, and to reframe Gray's architecture as heteronormative.

E.1027 was alive, in its own way. Bonnevier embraced the house's ambivalence, its refusal to be easily categorized, and recognized it as an opponent of the status quo. On the other hand, Colomina conferred on the house at Roquebrune-Cap-Martin the respect it deserves, unmasking the motivations of its detractors: "as Colomina clearly demonstrates, Gray's house never had a proper history. To the contrary, these older models of historical inquiry—based on what have come to be understood as patriarchal notions of autonomy, authorship and intentionality—betrayed the work of Eileen Gray."³⁶ Eileen Gray herself did consider *E.1027* to have a life of its own: "Gray calls the habitation 'un organisme vivant'."³⁷ A being with a future, a present, and a past, a house with a philosophy and a sexuality, a place that welcomed change.

What do houses want?

Do they want anything from us? from each other?

Does a house even want us in it?

Houses, like images, are built upon shifting premises, potential implications, and hidden truths. As subalterns they are essentially powerless, however this only strengthens the force of their desires. These desires may exist primarily in our own speculations and imagination, yet they still affect us considerably. In order to be truthful and genuine in our inquiry into the desires of houses, a shift in our expectations and behavior must occur. For Mitchell, this “modification/dislocation” consists of two parts:

(1) the assent to the constitutive fiction of pictures as ‘animated’ beings, quasi-agents, mock persons; and (2) the construal of pictures not as sovereign subjects or disembodied spirits but as subalterns whose bodies are marked with the stigmata of difference, and who function both as ‘go-betweens’ and scapegoats in the social field of human visibility. It’s crucial to this strategic shift that we not confuse the desire of the picture with the desires of the artist, the beholder, or even the figures in the picture. What pictures want is not the same as the message they communicate or the effect they produce; it’s not even the same as what they say they want. Like people, pictures may not know what they want; they have to be helped to recollect it through a dialogue with others.³⁸

I have tried, in my own way, to follow this perspective, to enter in a dialogue with my houses, to search for answers within them rather than without.

Houses want to know us. A house can have many names: room, studio, bachelor, 1 Bedroom, 2 Bedroom, loft, apartment, penthouse, town house, condominium, mansion, castle. But this name is only a designation of its form. The house wants to be known. Wittgenstein’s house wants you to see its logic, wants you to recognize its geometry, its distinct symmetries, truly feel its space. Gray’s house wants you to be free, wants you to escape and to run away with you. Flexibility is the house’s specific attribute. A house is a fluid space: even the most constrictive residence has some versatility; it welcomes anyone and everyone who will treat it with respect. A house well lived-in will take on aspects of its owner, it will adapt its personality; it wants to be friends. A new house is like a stranger: you meet tentatively, see if you can develop a real connection, a perfect fit. Maude’s house, like Maude, wants to be

left to its own devices: it is Bruno's home so long as he needs it for Maude's sake. Duras' house is a member of the household; it wants to be more than a spectator, it wants to be a relative, to be part of the family, part of its genealogy. Houses as individuals have individual wants and needs: the country home is happy in a remote location; the vacation home is happy to see visitors; the city house likes to snuggle up to its neighbors; the suburban home needs its space. Houses want purpose. More than the purpose of the architect, more than the expectations and uses of the homeowner, their materiality and their physicality, the activation of their design and their location, give them presence, an essence. Houses, as images, want a voice: "Above all, it wants to be *heard* — an impossibility for the silent, still image."³⁹ And as for the distinction between house and home? The house is what we want; the home is when the house wants us back.

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Notes

¹ W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004): 7.

² *Ibid.* 14.

³ *Ibid.* 52.

⁴ *Ibid.* 14.

⁵ Joseph Rykwert, *The Idea of a Town: The Anthropology of Urban Form in Rome, Italy and the Ancient World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988): 174.

⁶ Aaron Betsky, *Building Sex: Men, Women, Architecture, and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1995): 3.

⁷ Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, 46.

⁸ Ibid. 34.

⁹ Wittgenstein's architecture is rooted in mechanics: he makes use of weight, friction, and energy, as opposed to the machine aesthetics of efficiency and streamlined productivity preferred by his modernist counterparts. Further, Wittgenstein is unconcerned with creating a *gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art). His design process does not reflect the revolutionary social concerns that lead modern architects to devote themselves to the open-plan and the modular order that was meant to liberate humankind.

¹⁰ Bernard Leitner, *The Wittgenstein House* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 2000): 10, Note 1.

¹¹ Ibid. 13, Note 24.

¹² Ibid. 24.

¹³ Qtd. in *ibid.* 22.

¹⁴ Ibid. 35.

¹⁵ Ibid. 67.

¹⁶ Ibid. 76.

¹⁷ Ibid. 88.

¹⁸ Ibid. 11, Note 8.

¹⁹ Richard Brody, "A House of Her Own," *The New Yorker* (December 8, 2008): Accessed November 29, 2012.

²⁰ "I thought for a long while about buying a house. I never imagined I could ever own a new one. The house at Neauphle used to be a couple of farms built a little while before the Revolution. It must be just over two hundred years old. I've often thought about it, It was there in 1789 and 1870. It's where the forests of Rambouillet and Versailles meet. And in 1958 it belonged to me. I thought about it some nights till it almost hurt. I saw it lived in by the women. I saw myself as preceded by them, in the same bedrooms, the same twilights. There'd been nine generations of women before me within those walls; dozens of people gathered around the fires – children, farm workers, cow girls. All over the house there were surfaces rubbed smooth where grown-ups, children, and dogs had gone in and out of the doors" (Marguerite Duras, *Practicalities*, translated by Barbara Bray [New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990]: 43).

²¹ "I write about women in order to write about myself, about myself alone through the ages" (*ibid.* 46).

²² Suzanne Jacob, *Maude*, translated by Luise von Flotow (Toronto: Guernica, 1997): 12.

²³ Ibid. 10.

²⁴ Ibid. 10.

²⁵ Betsky, *Building Sex*, 32.

²⁶ Qtd. in Beatriz Colomina, "Battle lines: E.1027," in *The Sex of Architecture*, edited by Diana Agrest, Patricia Conway, and Leslie Kanes Weisman, 174 (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996).

²⁷ Ibid. 174.

²⁸ Gray qtd. in Katarina Bonnevier, "A Queer Analysis of Eileen Gray's E.1027," in *Negotiating Domesticity: Spatial productions of gender in modern architecture*, edited by Hilde Heynen and Güslüm Gaydar, 168 (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).

²⁹ Ibid. 166.

³⁰ Ibid. 166.

³¹ Sylvia Lavin, "Colomina's Web: Reply to Beatriz Colomina," in *The Sex of Architecture*, edited by Diana Agrest, Patricia Conway, and Leslie Kanes Weisman, 187 (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996).

³² Vitruvius' text *De Architecture* is most commonly known today as *The Ten Books on Architecture*.

³³ Betsky, *Building Sex*, 48).

³⁴ Bonnevier writes, "The heterosexual matrix is a precondition for how we understand our built environment. In other words, buildings participate in the construction of norms, but they seem to be about bricks and mortar – nothing else. In domestic building activity, the heterosexual matrix is often blatantly obvious" ("A Queer Analysis of Eileen Gray's E.1027," 167).

³⁵ Ibid.166.

³⁶ Lavin, "Colomina's Web," 184.

³⁷ Bonnevier, "A Queer Analysis of Eileen Gray's E.1027," 167.

³⁸ Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, 46.

³⁹ Ibid. 45.

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