

# THE PRIVATE LIVES OF OBJECTS

Instructor: Laurel Consuelo Broughton / WELCOMEPROJECTS

## IN BRIEF

Project: House

Research: Relationship Between Objects and Architecture

Kinne Week: LONDON

Columbia University  
Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation  
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## Stories

*I am talking here about a time when I began to doubt the premises of all the stories I had ever told myself..*  
- Joan Didion, *The White Album*

Until recently it could be said without much hesitation that the objects in our everyday lives were controlled by the people who use them. Information or stories was stored or registered on the surface of objects through the physical traces of how we used them and through the visible relationships created between the various objects we collected. The object in material culture terms was both a tool and an artifact in a narrative *written* by individual people.

Today, we find ourselves surrounded by the growing so-called Internet of Things and the continued ubiquity of the eerily named "smart object." Typically, I might dismiss these as media theorist Ian Bogost does as simply a capitalist ploy to build data "about [our] toasting and grilling and refrigeration habits" in order to sell more toasters. Undeniably, the objects amongst us are conduit of information. A single person's desire for golden brown toast is a raw data point in a pool of a million data points collected en masse from all toasters. But to observe the obvious, these toasting habits get reduced to invisible data stored now not *ON* but *IN* the objects. The data collected allows plain smart objects to continually get smarter. In this sense, no longer are people telling stories through objects; objects are recording "stories" about people.

If the relationship of people to object has changed, click bait on Slate.com unintentionally hints at a possible, unfortunate new relationship between architecture and the object. A piece reviews the new Amazon 4-Star Store in Berkeley, CA. The author finds the store to be a random jumble of items. But in fact the group of items for sale isn't random at all; an algorithm has selected them because they correspond most closely to the Berkeley buying-habit norm. The algorithm-selected-object is then housed in an architecture (here a store, but soon why not a house) designed to collect objects not mediated by any one person. In the store the lack of human curation—a method by which we construct narratives—presents the perception of randomness. The design of the Berkeley store is more warehouse than merchandised retail space. When extrapolated to the domestic, the smart object coupled with algorithmic selection can't help but soon transform the home as well. And suddenly one wonders, in the age of the "smart home" is the person no longer the central protagonist in the story of architecture?



Fantasia. Disney 1940.

## Objects

*Beds can become anything, buildings can become people, and people can suddenly merge and become objects.*  
-Madelon Vriesendorp

Control of the narrative is shifting *literally*. Our relationships to both objects and architecture have been destabilized. Yet this predicament is strangely familiar. We've always feared that the inanimate objects that surround us have complex inner lives. From Freud's *unheimlich* or uncanny to almost any Disney cartoon, objects come to life—we both know them and they are unknowable and uncontrollable—familiar and unfamiliar. In the fictions we write, objects oscillate from cute to terrifying. It's a spectrum in which the helpful dolls that populate *Toy Story* dissolve into the murderous Chucky in *Child's Play*. Or perhaps, exemplifying just where we might be right now, the lazy apprentice Mickey in *Fantasia*, unwilling to clean the castle, gives life to an army of brooms that first cleanup but then take over. Our fantasies once imagined come to life.

So then what are the private lives of objects? Film genre presents an interesting place to start—the buddy picture, the fantastic adventure or the horror movie. In each type, the object's relationships with people vary: the object is a companion, a group of objects go on a journey, the object is a killer of humans. Obliquely, these positions suggest possible interior worlds as objects in reality gain greater autonomy over people. But anthropomorphism may not be the only way to imagine that objects have private lives. The virtual or systems or the collection and organization of data might write an object's monologue and organize its relationships.

How then, if we still have time, might we imagine new relationships between objects and architecture moving forward if they don't revolve firstly around people? If we search the discipline of architecture for precedent it's the house museum that comes into focus as an unlikely ally. Formerly architect or designer-inhabited houses make for convenient examples. Take the Charles Moore House in Austin, the Alexander Girard House in Santa Fe, the Sir John Soane's Museum and House in London or the Eames House in Los Angeles. In the latter two as pointed out by Sylvia Lavin in her 2003 essay *The Temporary Contemporary*, the architecture becomes a mechanism for the display of collections of objects. Of the Soane House Lavin writes, "the story of the house is, in part, the story of finding the proper place for



Flagrant Délit. Madelon Vriesendorp 1975.

[his] improper quantity of things." The building itself was stretched and modified continually to accommodate objects. In contrast to the expanding Soane house, the architecture of the Eames house remained fixed. The Eames conceptualized the relationship of objects to building as "functional decoration." Defined by historian Pat Kirkham, functional decoration was "carefully composed arrangements of disparate objects... within interior spaces. The aesthetic [is] one of addition, juxtaposition, composition, changing scales, and 'extra-cultural surprise.'" In both houses, a person in real-time curated the relationships between the architecture and the objects. Now post-person, the house museum is experienced by a visitor as a binding of architecture, object and story alone. Might these spaces hold some clue for us as we look over a threshold into a strange future of a destabilized relationship with the objects around us and the architecture that contains them? The studio will visit house museums in New York during the first half of the semester and in London (including the Soane House) during Kinne Week.

## Houses

*But can there be a detective story of the interior itself, of the hidden mechanisms by which space is constructed as interior? Which maybe to say, a detective story of detection itself, of the controlling look, the look of control, the controlled look. What do we have to go on? What clues? -Beatriz Colomina*

Grappling with a destabilized relationship of architecture to object and object to person, each student will design a house for objects. People are present in each project but not the central protagonists. The studio will start with the collection of a group of objects that will become the ongoing protagonists of the semester. Looking at films that have imagined animate objects, we will investigate genre as a guide to bring our objects to life and create the spaces in which they inhabit. We will also examine other moments when object relations have become destabilized as precedents both informational, aesthetic and otherwise. Beginning with André Breton's charge that "... [Surrealism] was a revolution of objects and a revolution through objects" and moving through the twentieth century, we will be looking at work the Meret Oppenheim, Dali and other Surrealists, the paintings of Henri Rousseau, the illustrations of Saul Steinberg, the sculptural work of Claes Oldenburg, and the drawings of Madelon Vriesendorp and early OMA and more.



Charles Moore House. 1984. Austin, Texas.

## House Museum Visits

We will be submersing ourselves into the peculiar space of the house museum as a binding of architecture, object and story. We will visit one house museum each week during the first half of the semester, culminating in a trip to LONDON during Kinne Week for a house museum tour finale.

## Project Procedures in Brief\*

In format the studio work will be comprised of four connected projects that interweave storytelling and design. The projects grow in scale from the collection of objects and interviews with them, to a 1:1 container for the objects and documented interactions with it, to a related interior and film, and finally to a house presented as a book.

1. Find five objects at thrift stores. Ask each about themselves? Bring the objects to studio and report on what they told you. In studio we will choose one. This object will be with you for the entire semester so be kind to it. Sit with them. Ask what is their politic, their story? What can we learn from them aesthetically? Write an interview between you and the object(s).

2. Construct a single container for the objects out of real materials at 1:1. How does the container hold, observe, narrate the objects from the outside? Can the container be of the thing inside it? Write a diary entry from one object regarding an interaction with the container.

3. Taking your container as a jumping off point, design an interior space for your objects. Using a model at 1' = 1/2", make a film that tells the story of the objects in the interior.

4. Design a house for your objects from the interior out. Site will be determined. Illustrate this house. Produce a detailed model at 1' = 1/16" scale. Combine steps 1-4 into a book.

\*Each step will be elaborated on further and individually defined in conversations during studio meetings.

## BIO

Laurel Consuelo Broughton / WELCOMEPROJECTS

Laurel is a designer and educator based in Los Angeles who explores her interests in narrative, material culture, and style within architecture, design, and fashion through projects, publications, and collaborations at a multiplicity of scales. The object as form and cultural figure features broadly throughout all her work. She is director of WELCOMEPROJECTS and WELCOMECOMPANIONS in Los Angeles. She received her Bachelor of Arts from New York University (NYU) in Comparative Literature and Critical Theory and her Masters of Architecture from the Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI\_arc). In the Spring of 2017, Laurel was the Howard A. Friedman Visiting Professor in the Practice of Architecture at University of California, Berkeley College of Environmental Design.

WELCOMEPROJECTS is a studio of discursive sensibilities focused on the production of real things in the world along with all the incumbent, critical fictions needed for their survival. We design projects large (buildings, houses, interiors), medium (installations, films, furniture) and small (handbags, games, wagons) imbuing each with curiosity and playful seriousness. We tell stories through design. Design work has most recently been exhibited at the 2017 Chicago Architecture Biennial, Materials and Applications in Silverlake, A+D Architecture and Design Museum, Harvard Graduate School of Design, and galleries in Los Angeles and New York and most recently published in Los Angeles Times, Art Papers, Attention, Pidgin, Metropolis, Offramp, and Surface.

WELCOMEPROJECTS designs and produces WELCOMECOMPANIONS, a project that reinterprets everyday sartorial accessories and objects. The project seeks to inject a sense of play, suspense, and narrative into the objects we interact with and depend on on a daily basis. We suggest the novelty that in our accessories, function is not wholly dependent on utilitarian form. Launched in 2012 WELCOMECOMPANIONS has been featured in numerous publications including Vogue.com, New York Times, Paper Magazine, Vogue Italia, Elle Italia, Newsweek, Marie Claire Italia, Lucky Magazine and Nylon Magazine among others. WELCOMECOMPANIONS are sold in boutiques in Los Angeles, New York, Tokyo, San Francisco, Sydney, and Hong Kong.

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