

# Furnishing the Primitive Hut: Allan Wexler's Experiments Beyond Buildings

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## INTRODUCTION

*Allan Wexler's works explore the foundations of architecture, furniture, and clothing to find their shared fundamentals. To do this, he learns that he needs to unlearn the conventions of design and makes them evident in experimental projects. With a background in architecture, he starts with drawing, modeling, scale relationships, and details to uncover tools of the discipline. He realizes that using small-scale models to explore ideas becomes confused in full-scale constructions, while drawings have trouble making the transition from two to three dimensions. Wexler's work is established in the realm of experimentation and conceptual development where early design processes grow. Intentional misreading of these basic tools reveals new potential for their reapplication into architecture and an entry point into related design critiques.*

*To uncover these tools, Aaron Betsky frames Wexler's works in the context of everyday rituals. Wexler chooses programs to work with, often through such basic rituals as preparing a meal or drinking coffee. The dynamics involved in these rituals are translated into dynamic spaces to contain them. One example is a mobile kitchen designed for Parsons The New School for Design that presents itself as an anonymous crate with handles and hinges as the only clue for its opening. The crate resides in a void in the wall and, when pulled out, opens up to reveal all the necessary amenities custom-built into the kitchen crate. Wine glasses, napkins, plates, and so on are all custom fit into specific compartments. This comprehensive interior does not stem from the history of the Gesamtkunstwerk but from the starting point of exploring how interiors can be altered to include these objects in a mappable location.*

*Wexler focuses on details that are often more intricate than those of a conventional kitchen, such as a vertical panel that holds each individual wine glass inserted into a cutout profile of itself. When the vertical plane is opened,*

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*it becomes a semitransparent wall. Wexler's curiosity resides in these types of thresholds where walls are treated as permeable surfaces and poché is altered to register activities on both sides. Where a wall is typically passive, Wexler integrates functions normally found in the interior and pushes them into the wall, embedding functional interiors within passive interiors. These works test boundaries, whether they are larger conceptual or more immediate such as poché.*

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ALLAN WEXLER is an artist whose gallery objects bring us back to first things: how we keep the rain off our heads, how we define our space, how we measure our time, how we dress. He elaborates on these simple acts in form. This is the core of his work. It is a type of experimentation with what we think we know; his work confronts us with the unknowability of even the simplest aspects of our daily lives.

Wexler accomplishes this revelation in scale models of our reality. He reduces the complexity of our routines into totemic objects. These activities let us stage a ritual re-enactment of daily practices that it is up to us as viewers to invent. Wexler makes basic shapes that he elaborates into forms beyond function. He represents what is real in reality itself, and then makes it impossible to come to any simple understanding of his work. Eminently simple yet complex in its implications, Wexler's work stands as a paradigm for a practice of making, which is beyond either art or architecture.

I propose a concern with the primitive hut at the core of Wexler's work. This preoccupation is most evident in the series of sukkahs that he designed between 1988 and 1990. The sukkah is a ritualistic object or house Jews erect at harvest time to celebrate their bounty, give thanks, and center themselves in the world. The structures Wexler proposed bring together many of the themes in his other work, and pose a reference point both for our understanding of his activity and for the role of such an artist as Wexler in our society. Rooted in his heritage as a Jew and as an architect, these pieces make remaining solely within that heritage impossible in the same way they confound our attempts to see the structures as the serene shelters we might expect. They are models for Wexler's art.

In designing these pieces, but also in the many reiterations of their basic forms in his later work, Wexler went back to first principles. As architectural historian Joseph Rykwert has pointed out, the sukkah is a version of the primitive hut or aedicula that many architects propose as the core of their discipline, its Rosetta stone and essence.<sup>1</sup> For many architects, the primitive hut is still the beginning point of an investigation of what it means to make architecture and what makes us at home in the world today.

Architects justify their activity through particular foundation myths. They assume that a time came in the evolution of erect apes into a human society that architecture was necessary.<sup>2</sup> Why we might need something called architecture, or what it was in its most primitive form, is open to discussion, and it is all these speculations that we can find in Wexler's work. We can find them in forms that are open, experimental, and uncertain in their status. Starting from architecture and its basic principles, Wexler gives us something that denies the certainty of architecture, its history, and its future.

The most universal assumption architects hold is that the core of their work is the making of some sort of order in the world. The first act of architecture is the creation of a place defined by borders. This enclosed territory has the function of keeping out both nature (wind, rain, snow, sun) and others who might want what one has. In the version promulgated by the abbé Laugier, this primitive hut is four posts that hold up a pyramidal roof.<sup>3</sup> This is an aedicula we can still find reiterated in countless forms of architecture.<sup>4</sup> The aedicula is a three-dimensional form of the mandala: it divides the world into four quadrants that correspond to the four directions of the winds and mark the passing of the sun both through the day and through the seasons.<sup>5</sup> Within the aedicula, man (not, at least until much later, woman), is at the center. From here, everything makes sense.

The temple, the palace, and the home itself are no more than elaborations of this first place of order. The throne room, the altar, the four-poster bed, and the dining table all re-enact this first point. This humanist story of architecture resonates with the child's drawing of a house, with our predilection for enclosed spaces with sloped roofs (such as our safe suburban homes), and with our desire to elaborate that first order in concatenations of rooms.<sup>6</sup>

There is another myth, however. It is one that goes back to Vitruvius and postulates the first gathering of man and woman not in a space of isolation, but around a campfire. Here, according to Vitruvius, language was born, and thus society grew up around a center that we could never occupy.<sup>7</sup> The fire is still at the core of our homes as the hearth, as are, later, those forms of technology that draw us out of the world and into a separate space; heating, plumbing, and television are versions of that original cultural center. The center of the house is not a place that we inhabit through a geometry realized in construction, but a void that we bring alive through the importation of both energy and narrative. Architecture is not an abstract endeavor, but a solidification of the stories we tell to make sense out of the world. Such narratives fix themselves not in one form, but into tools for changing nature into a place of human habitation. Architecture is essentially an enabler of technological importation.<sup>8</sup>

A third myth, best typified by the writing of German art historian Gottfried Semper, places the moveable tent at the core of architecture.<sup>9</sup> In this story, the first places we inhabited as human beings were temporary structures woven together from the twigs and branches around us. The act of building was originally an act of gathering together what already existed into a more and more intricate order. As we stripped the trees of their bark and wove increasingly elaborate structures, we began to develop patterns or rhythms that turned into decorative motifs.<sup>10</sup> Decoration and structure were to Semper not two separate elements, but were intricately and inexorably bound together.

The tent, moreover, was not something that replaces the ground on which it sits. It either decayed (or grew) after we stopped using it, or it became something we took with us when we moved on to the next campsite. Architecture here is no more and no less than an extension of our clothes, our furniture, and our tools into a form that can, if only for a night, enclose us. It is at the same time no more and no less than a conventionalization of the nature we still find all around us.

All three of these myths imply different attitudes about architecture and its role in our society. While the first assumes that we make forms that are abstract, rational, and separate from the world around us, the second implies that architecture is a form of signification that clarifies and actively changes the world. This latter story also displaces human habitation in favor of what man does, i.e., technology. Our ability to create an artificial environment, whether by words or by buildings, is here at the core of architecture. In the third postulated myth, the results of technology and the way in which we weave them together into patterns of everyday life form the elements of architecture.

Wexler has, whether consciously or not, explored all three of these modes of architecture. At the core of much of his work is the primitive hut, the child's drawing of the house turned into a three-dimensional form, and the ordering of reality into simple geometries. His early *Temple Houses* of 1977 and 1978, his *Office Buildings* of 1982 and 1988, and most particularly his stage set for the *Memory Theater of Giulio Camillo* (1986) all indicate this interest in the primitive hut. His studies into *Expandable Building* (1996), the various essays into how to drain rain off a roof (*Building for Water Collection with Buckets*, 1994), his more recent *Floating Roof Building* (1996), and even his attempts to make a simple house form out of a single sheet of material in a day (*8 Hours 15 Minutes*, 1997) are all part of the investigation of the Laugierian hut.

The same investigations into building materials are also a way of looking at architecture, in the second of the three scenarios, as a language. This is an investigation that Wexler continued with his "misreading" of the basic

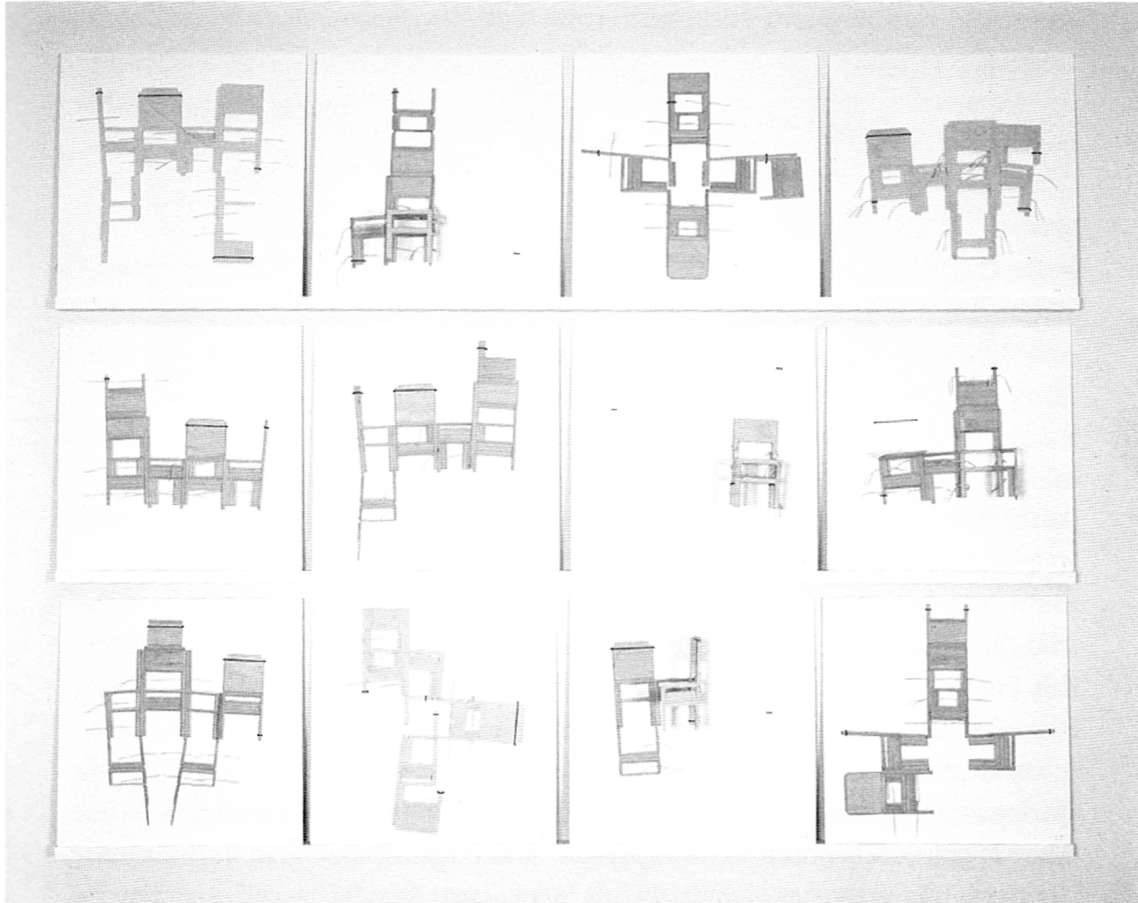


Fig. 3.19: Allan Wexler, *Twelve Unfolding Chairs*, 1998.

building block of American architecture—the wood stud—in paper form. It is one of his current obsessions, and it is leading him to propose forms that are as ephemeral as a painting. In *Twenty-Four Unfolded Houses* (1997) and *Twelve Unfolding Chairs* (1998), the architecture becomes literally just image. [Fig. 3.19] The ghost of construction implies the making of something, but, rather than constructing its reality, tells us a story about this act in its image cut loose from utility. At the same time, technology, and plumbing in particular, has long been central in much of his work. Wexler is telling us stories about what it means to make sense and a space within and outside of the metropolitan environment that surrounds us.

The notion of architecture as something that one weaves together is not as clearly present throughout Wexler's work, but it is evident in some of his earliest pieces, such as the *Forest Houses* (1976) and *Tree Intersecting Plane* (1977). Here Wexler gathered twigs and formed them into the simplest form of a house. Though he later became more and more preoccupied with the abstract form these early essays implied, his interest in architecture as pattern or convention remained strong. Such interest is evident in his hybrids between clothes, furniture, and architecture (*Body Furniture*,

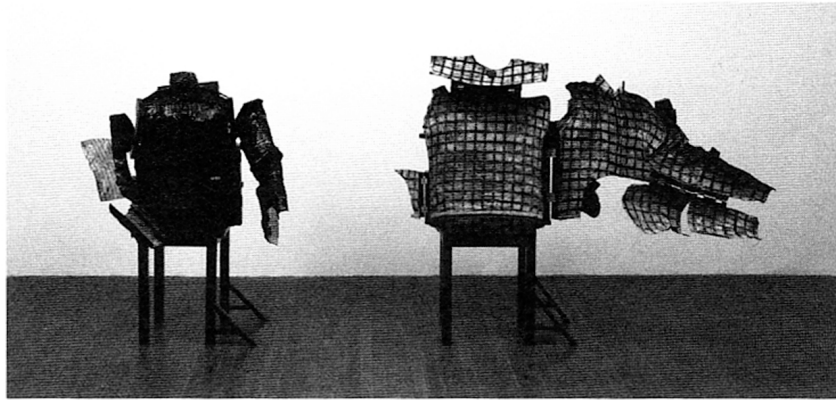


Fig. 3.20: Allan Wexler, *Body Furniture*, 1991.

1991) and his reduction of the primitive hut to a series of multicolored forms (*Color Studies for the House*, 1998). [Fig. 3.20]

Wexler is not content to investigate the potential of these myths. If he did, he might have become a conventional architect who translates her or his investigations in buildings that bury those ideas within forms that shelter or contain us. Instead, Wexler is interested in exploring the inconsistencies, absurdities, and lyrical qualities of all stories of architecture. His house forms come apart, peel away, and lose dimension as he dissects them. What they lose in their potential to represent inhabitation they gain in their ability to highlight the act of architecture. In a sense, Wexler is a rhetorician: he is engaged in making us aware of the urgency of architecture and convincing us of its necessity. To do this, he makes use of metaphors, enlarges details, glosses over the coherence of the story of building, and erects a convincing image of an alternative world.<sup>11</sup>

Thus the buckets that collect rain dangle in mid-air: the gutters that extend from the house in *Houses for Painting* (1994) become an abstract geometric pattern in the landscape (the cross that marks the spot of inhabitation becomes, perhaps ironically, perhaps unconsciously, but to great effect, a swastika); the houses split, come apart, and pose themselves as flayed and naked examples of what it means to make a place of inhabitation. These objects frustrate use not in order to confound us, but to confront us with the true nature of what it is they do.

Unlike a demagogue, however, Wexler does not convince us of anything. He leaves us dangling. Having investigated the basic elements of architecture and highlighted their functions, their associations, and their material, he leaves them in a delicate balance that he resolves only through composition. His work is, after all, not a proposal for the construction of houses that will make us comfortable, or a treatise about architecture, but art. It crystallizes our reality into forms that make us wonder about the world around us. It does so through representation and abstraction, employing both traditional

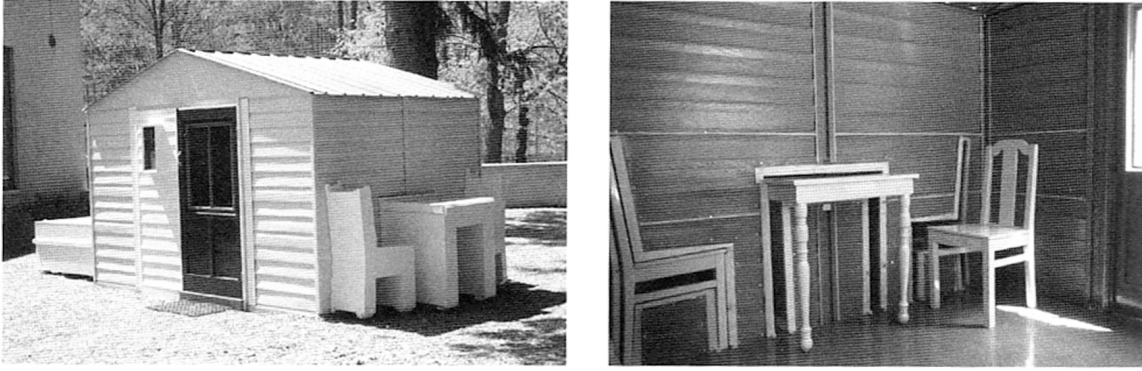
methods of explanation and the twentieth century methodology of collage. These are assemblies that work within the tradition of Schwitters' Merzbau, Malevich's investigations into new forms for a new century and a new society, van Doesburg's elaboration of neo-plastic forms into cafes and houses, and Mario Merz's igloos for postmodern nomads.

What enters into Wexler's work through its place within the art world is an endgame. Modern artists are not only interested in going back to first principles, but they also employ this return to basics to postulate a future in which art will approach reality. In doing so, they surmise, art will corrode both the naked world it has uncovered and its own making into nothing: pure white, an ultimate abstraction, the realm of the spirit, or the black hole that sucks up all the complexity and contradiction of modern art into the liebestod of modern art. Whether one approaches that end point through abstraction, as the De Stijl group and the constructivists did, through narrative, as in the work of some American precisionists or the work of Mark Rothko, or through the gathering of the world into an amalgamation that becomes so dense and enigmatic that we cannot read it, as did Merz and Joseph Beuys, for instance, or whether one employs all three techniques, as Gerhard Richter continues to do, matters little. The result is nothingness.

This is not the point at which Wexler arrives. Though some of his most lyrical pieces so destroy the basis out of which he has developed them ("paintings" in which the shadows of the chairs or houses he has cut out of the canvas become purely minimal ghosts), they always remain eminently real. They hold onto their sense of construction and utility while pulling it apart, because all the work shares one dominant characteristic: it is a model. These are not abstract images that hang on the wall; nor are they objects of use. Instead, they hover between those two extremes in scale, material, and function. They are proposals, miniature versions, or translations of a reality that may not exist and may not be something that could come into being.

The model is of course the basic working tool of the architect. It is what allows her or him the opportunity to reduce reality to a form that we can subject to our gaze and our manipulation. By reducing the real world to something that is smaller than us, we can exert control over it. This means that we can impose our will on the world, but also that we can project our personality onto that artificial realm. This is true not just for those who propose buildings. Dollhouses have the same function. They let us create a version of our world that we can arrange according to our will while letting us imagine a home in which we could have the role that we would like.

The model also serves as a ritualistic giver of order. The mandala and the aedicula are likewise such elements. All three rearrange a world that might be out of order in geometries that balance opposites, weave together complex relations, and propose a new form of order.<sup>12</sup> In a miniature, we can



Figs. 3.21 + 3.22: Allan Wexler, *Vinyl Milford House*, 1994.

see the world as if in a glass: it is removed from us, yet mirrors our reality. By building models, we lay a sense of order over the world that we believe will, through that very act, and if all the rituals are followed with precision (if the contract and the client follow our plans, for instance), come into being.

What is strange about Wexler's models is that they are out of whack. They peel apart at the seams, cannot stand up by themselves, don't present a reality that we would ever want to see realized. The *Series* of 1979 and 1980, for instance, present the primitive hut coming apart into pieces. The *Body Furniture* piece (1991) cannot operate unless we imprison ourselves within the objects, and at that point they lose their compositional integrity. The *Axometric Chairs* of 1998 exist, like some of Peter Eisenman's buildings, only as projections that translate the modeling tool itself into an unusable and perhaps purposely unsuitable form.<sup>13</sup>

These are, nonetheless, models. They have the scale of something smaller than ourselves. Even when they are "life size," as in *Vinyl Milford House* (1994) or *Home Show II* (1996), they are not structures that have a full sense of life and order to them as they exist. [Figs. 3.21 + 22] They have to be expanded, pulled apart, and elaborated by the user—at least as a proposition—in order for them to escape from their status as art objects. In doing so, they would of course immediately lose their connection to the artist's work as well as their financial value. Some of Vito Acconci's work comes to mind.

It is the status of these objects as both art objects and architectural models, and the tension Wexler manages to maintain between these two states, that gives them their force and originality. As such, they point to the beginnings of architecture and thus to the most fundamental questions about what make us at home in the world. They also refer us to the mundane reality of everyday life. At the same time, they remove these concerns from the environment that engendered them, whether this is the rarefied world of architectural history or the immediacy of our daily routines. As objects that exist in frames or on pedestals, they aspire to our attention. They distance themselves from us and propose something else. Like the Dutch





Fig. 3.23: Allan Wexler, *Parsons Kitchen*, 1994.

artist Constant, who for four decades has been erecting a utopian scenario in a similar mixture of paintings, models, and plans (*New Babylon*, 1958–present),<sup>14</sup> Wexler cannot propose any definite solutions. This makes his work all the more poignant and, in our speculative society, effective.

Wexler is acting as a tinker or mechanic. His working method is a strange combination of the deliberate and the ad hoc, mixing rigid rules for construction (time limits, material choices, geometries, typologies) with a sense that the whole thing is thrown together so that one can see all the pieces that went into its construction. In this sense, Wexler is engaged in explorations of form that mix the rational traditions of architecture with the more intuitive methods of what we consider art. What brings these two together is another, all-American notion—that of the maker, whether artist or architect, as a tinker who operates on a reality that is always new and fresh and transforms it through objects that are meant to be both importations into and condensations of this landscape. From Thomas Jefferson to Frank Lloyd Wright to Frank Gehry, architects have engaged in such forms of making, but one can also find this tradition in the work of such artists as Joseph Cornell and Robert Rauschenberg.

In surveying Wexler's work, it is important to remember that he has moved beyond, or perhaps farther into, modes of inhabitation. Here he is acting as a mechanic of exposition: he exposes and works on *Parsons Kitchen* (1994) as perhaps the anti-model for this aspect of his work. [Fig. 3.23] Here the piece is not a model, but a working implement that serves as an unfolding bar for a school of architecture. The box is simple and dense. Its beauty derives from the arrangement of objects within it. This is a condensation at

real scale and of real use. As such, it is a translation of the intention of his very first proposal that went beyond the making of a building—*Proposal for the Manhattan Skyline* (1973) into the forms that are familiar from Wexler's other work. Arrangement here is everything.

Wexler has done several other works of this sort, including the *Crate House* of 1991 and the *Bucket House* of 1997. These are real buildings that we can actually inhabit. Yet all is not well, even in these houses. We engage in them only through ritual, and only in an ordered manner. We have to push and pull at them, deforming them to make them work. Here the work is more like a tea ritual. The house itself, its place in the landscape, the implements it contains, and the actions one performs in it offer an alternative artifice in which a balance between the body, the mind, and the world is finally something one can achieve.<sup>15</sup> The relation to this way of organizing the world becomes evident in such pieces as *Coffee Seeks Its Own Level* (1990), in which the participants must follow the rules the artist has set in order to complete the work.

*Hat/Roof* (1994) typifies much of this work: here the pyramidal roof no longer tops a building, but rather is a piece of clothing one wears. The furniture one might find inside a dwelling here become planes that cantilever off the wearer. The object can only exist in use, and yet it is not particularly functional. Though one might find precedents for work like this in both folk culture (display racks Asian vendors carry with them, or African hats that act as storage devices) and in architecture (the *Archigram Suitaloon* of 1966), this piece proposes something slightly different: that we cannot separate architecture, functional objects, and the user or observer.

We do know this hybrid between structure of inhabitation, object of use, and user in our daily lives. We call it furniture. Much of Wexler's work indeed has the quality of being like a chair, a table, or a storage device. It resembles such pieces quite literally, to the point that one could call Wexler as much a furniture designer as an architect. He is, of course, neither, but an artist—someone who uses these particular media not in order to affirm their nature, but to explore their potential and make us aware of them. Though this might sound like a reductivist definition of his work, Wexler's capability at activating the simple act of sitting or using a flat surface is immense.

The most extreme example of his art in this case is the *Scaffold Furniture* (1988), in which each aspect of using a piece of furniture is separated into a single object which is then stretched out in a Giacometti-like elongation of an otherwise familiar form. The effect approaches that of a tea ritual, because issues of balance and sequence of use become such a delicate set of considerations. Though pieces such as *Recycle-Conference Room* (1990) and the *Chair A Day* series of the same year might seem to present much more "normal" versions of furniture, they confound our expectations

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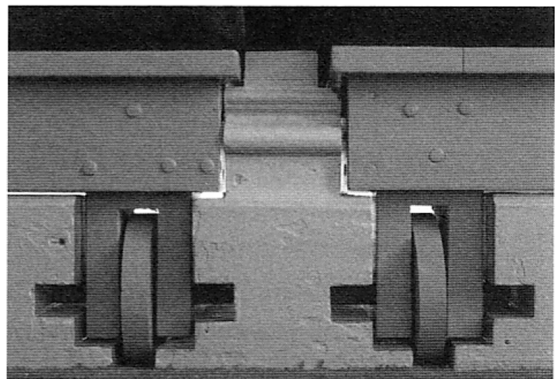
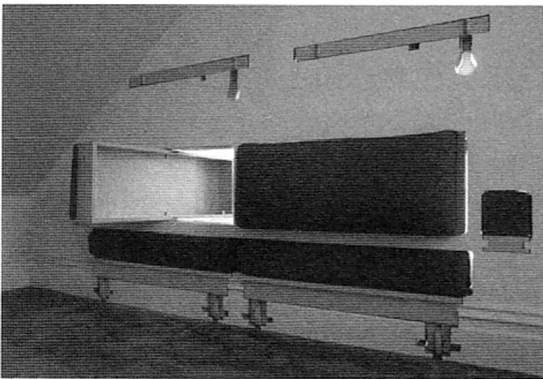


Fig. 3.24: Allan Wexler, *Chair A Day*, 1990.

not in use, but in material. [Fig. 3.24] The former is a collection of pieces Wexler gathered out of cast-off chairs and reassembled for an extremely formal use. The latter falls into the same category as the above-mentioned *8 Hours 15 Minutes* with its interest in serial production using a limited palette in a set period of time.

In more recent work, it is becoming difficult to tell furniture, model, building, and abstract object apart. Wexler seems to be working toward not so much an integration of his various concerns into singular objects, as a resolution of the profound instability of his work into itself. He is now making furniture out of paper, furniture that is painting, furniture that is buildings, and furniture that exists as models. Instead of making houses in miniature form or inhabiting models with accouterments, Wexler is exploring the unstable position between all of these things. He then represents this in materials that mix media, so that a house is made out of the stuff of drawings and drawings are made out of furniture.

We can call the result either art or furniture. Traditionally, furniture is something that exists between the act of making shelter, structure, or order, and the body itself. It exists as a piece of technology that lets us inhabit and be comfortable in a world we have made for ourselves. It stands at the end of a long tradition of honing basic forms down into shapes that are easy to construct and that respond to the shape of the body. It confers status and defines areas of use.



Figs. 3.25–27: Allan Wexler, *Mattress Factory Gallery Residence*, 1988.

In Wexler's hands, furniture becomes something that does none of these things. It constricts or confronts the body. It denies use. Wexler has either removed functionality or has designated the object as something he is willing to sell within the art market (the use of which, therefore, will diminish its value). Wexler's furniture is, therefore, Wexler's art.

If I were to designate Wexler's work in any manner beyond this, I would say that it is experimental. Wexler experiments on and in the real world. He pulls apart the structures of our everyday life, plays with the materials out of which we construct our surroundings and our implements, and opens up new spaces within a world we thought we had defined. Sometimes these are spaces that only the imagination can enter through the portal of the model. Sometimes the proposals seem to indicate a return to basic principles rather than a progression into a bright future. What remains inherent throughout his work is the sense of experimentation—an investigation that operates as an extension of our ability to be at home in the world, to remake our reality, and to question our existence through what we make. [Figs. 3.25–27]

## Notes

- 1 Joseph Rykwert, *On Adam's House in Paradise: The Idea of the Primitive hut in Architectural History* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1972).
- 2 As Rykwert rightly points out, discussions about the beginnings of architecture dominated much of the thinking at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in the 18th and 19th centuries. For an especially fruitful discussion of the impact of historical meanings on the definition of the language of architecture, see Sylvia Lavin, *Quatremere de Quincy and the Invention of a Modern Language of Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992).
- 3 Marc-Antoine Laugier, *Essai sur l'Architecture* (Paris: Michel Lambert, 1753).
- 4 John Summerson, "Heavenly Mansions," in *Heavenly Mansions and Other Essays on Architecture* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1963), pp. 1–28.
- 5 Though the mandala was popularized in the west by Jung, it has long been and remains an active part of many Buddhist religions.
- 6 For a modern speculation on this elaboration, see Kent Bloomer and Charles Moore, *Body, Memory, and Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).
- 7 Vitruvius Pollio, *The Ten Books on Architecture*, trans. Morris Hicky Morgan (New York: Dover Publications, 1960), pp. 35ff.
- 8 Cf. Reyner Banham, *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment* (London: The Architectural Press, 1969) and Siegfried Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948).
- 9 Gottfried Semper, *The Four Elements of Architecture and Other Writings*, trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave and Wolfgang Herman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
- 10 Ornament has, of course, become anathema to most architects. Only recently have theoreticians and practitioners begun to re-examine the possibility of seeing ornament, decoration, and non-structural pattern as an integral part of the body of architecture.
- 11 Cf. Judith Buber, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (London: Routledge Publishers, 1997).
- 12 This is the structuralist view of the model as espoused by Claude Levi Strauss in his *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*.
- 13 Eisenman built an "axonometric model" as the end result of his House X Project in 1979.
- 14 Cf. Constant, *Schilderijen/Paintings*, trans. James Harte Bell and John Richard Von Sturmer (Amsterdam and Boston: Stedelijk Museum and Beacon Press, 1996).
- 15 The tea ceremony has long fascinated Western artists and designers for its fusion of ritual, design, and sensory experiences. The classic text on the subject, first published in 1906, is *The Book of Tea* by Uakuzo Okakura (Boston: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1956).