

The Museum of Modern Art

11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019 Tel. 956-6100 Cable: Modernart

RELEASE NO. 40

ITALY: THE NEW DOMESTIC LANDSCAPE

Design as Postulation

Director: Emilio Ambasz

House Environment

May 26, 1972 - September 11, 1972

Designer: Ettore Sottsass, Jr., Collaborator Ula Saloara

Patron: ANIC - Lanerossi

Producer: Kartell with the participation of Ideal Standard, Boffi, Tecno, Decor

The basic unit of this environment is a movable closet, a kind of shell on wheels, colored a neutral grey. By the type of its infill this shell, or its multiples, become responsive to the uses it serves, such as kitchen, seat, jukebox, shower, toilet, shelf, closet etc. By the manner in which these various units are hinged together, or wheeled to new positions, an infinite variety of groupings and spaces may be formed. According to this vision, the elements of furniture lose their traditional forms to adopt only one, that of a movable volume. The traditional areas of the house (kitchen, living room, etc.) lose their meaning. The space of the house, thus freed, will adopt the changing configurations given by the free arrangement of the modular units. Hierarchies of the house are broken, traditional roles become meaningless. A member of the household, sitting inside the seat-closet, looks through the blue-glass wall of the other side of the domestic space which thus becomes transformed into an "exterior landscape."

Material: plastic, reinforced polyester

Color: grey

Color film for TV directed by Massimo Magri (Politecne, Milan).

Photo credits: Valerio Castelli (unmarked photos), Jean-Pierre Maurer (marked).

Statement by Ettore Sottsass, Jr.

Given the time and conditions and given the general views held by people as well, my pieces of furniture on show in the exhibition can be nothing more than prototypes, or perhaps even pre-prototypes, and thus, if you approach the various pieces, you realize that hardly anything really "works." You realize that no water flows through the pipes, that the stove doesn't heat, that the refrigerator isn't cold and such things; you realize that no product engineering (as they say in industry) has been done.

As I said before, this is partly because of the little time I had at my disposal and partly because these pieces of furniture represent a series of ideas and not a series of products to be put on the market this evening or tomorrow morning.

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So I hope no one will wonder how much they cost and where they can be bought, because they are obviously not priced, and they are not on sale anywhere.

The point should be made very clear that the aim of the project is not to achieve a product as such, but to state and solicit ideas, otherwise one might find himself lacking a center of reference, even from the formal angle of view. I mean, in other words, that I wasn't in the least concerned to make furniture, or an elegant, cute, sweet or amusing environment, and still less was I concerned to design silent things, allowing the spectator to remain calm and happy within his psychic and cultural status-quo (which may nonetheless turn out to be extremely complicated). But perhaps what I really did was the opposite. The form is not cute at all. It is a kind of orgy of the use of plastic taken as a material which allows an almost complete deconditioning process from the interminable chain of psycho-erotic self-indulgences concerning "possession." I mean the possession of objects, I mean the pleasure of possessing something which seems to us precious, which seems to us precious because it is made out of a precious material, it has a precious form, it has been difficult to make, it is fragile, or because of plenty of other reasons.

The form isn't cute but rather brutal and even, maybe, rough, and the expected deconditioning process, even if it works in a negative direction, I mean in the direction of the eventual elimination of the self-indulgence of possession, will certainly commit whoever ventures to use these objects. For to eliminate the protecting layer of alibis which we built around ourselves always necessitates great commitment.

To explain this more simply, let's say that the idea is to succeed in making furniture from which we are so detached, in which we are so disinterested and uninvolved that it is of absolutely no importance to us. That is, the form is, at least in intention, designed so that after a time it loses substance and disappears.

Inside these pieces of furniture, which therefore become mere equipped "containers" -- ordinary boxes -- are placed all the other elements invented to supply as efficiently as possible the traditional catalogue of needs, which our productive-industrial society has slowly drawn up. There is the stove to cook on, the refrigerator to keep the food in, the cabinet to store clothes, the shower under which to wash, a place to sit and read a book, a jukebox to give us sound, a bookcase for books, and so on. The catalogue of needs grows or diminishes according to the culture of the ethnic group to which the user belongs, but the containers remain impassive. They have no formal link with the owner's ethnic group. He will use more or less containers, he will own more or less boxes, and will finally resolve the problem in terms of quantity rather than quality (as the current talk goes).

I could obviously have worked on the interiors of the containers much more, in an attempt to find a quantitative rather than qualitative solution to specific needs. But I didn't, partly because I hadn't enough time, and partly because I shall do something of the kind later on. Should anyone accuse me of having neglected the interiors of the containers, I'd certainly agree that he may be right.

Smoothly running wheels are then attached to the pieces, so that even when weighed down by whatever is inside them, a child can move them about as he likes with com-

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plete ease. The idea is that the elements can get close or apart from one another, and indeed anyone living amongst this furniture can keep the pieces at a distance or can draw them closer to himself, his friend or relatives as and when he likes to. The idea is that everybody, either as an individual or as the representative of a group, can indicate through his furniture the various situations through which he passed during his private or communal adventure, because the states of need, tragedy, joy, illness, birth and death always take place themselves within the given area, they move like sea creatures, they diminish or increase, they go to right or left, up or down, they coagulate into colonies, dissolve into dust, solidify into rocks or soften to plankton, and so on.

Thus, given our advanced technologies, or at least those technologies of which we talk so much, I thought of the possibility of eliminating a series of rigid elements in the building of houses, above all of eliminating mains. It is possible to imagine each person having his personal stock of liquid, heat, air, refuse, words, sounds or what else, which he could carry about with him where and when he likes. For such an idea to work, however, we must be able to envisage a society or group of people which does not barricade itself inside great walled fortresses, people who are prepared not to hide, people who don't feel the need, or even perhaps the irreplaceable necessity to continually demonstrate their imagined status, to live in houses which are nothing else than cemeteries containing the tombs of their memoires. An idea such as this can only work on the assumption that the "rite" of life, as Ambasz calls it, can begin anew every morning with a new awareness of existence, and on the assumption that our memories as such need not necessarily solidifying into emblems, but should remain day after day as a sort of living plasma to start daily all over again; for we know that no one can do without memories, and no one is able to eliminate them from his personal bounds.

The pieces of furniture can then be joined either to one another or to the mains: electrical, liquid, air, and having removable hinges and connections they can equally well be dismantled. So not only can these containers be grouped together or dispersed, but they can also continually assume new forms, sinuous as a snake or rigid as they great Chinese wall, they can create areas that are either transparent or closed, deep and narrow or wide and open. In other words, they can at any moment provide the most suitable setting for the drama which is about to take place, or which is already in progress.

I have often wondered what the relationship is between a formal environment and the events born and carried through in that environment. I have often wondered if there is a reason why declarations of war are made from imposing buildings with domes and white columns, or if there is a reason why the sweetest songs are born in the streets of the poor, why in the houses of the rich events seem to take place as if they were mathematical operations, and so on. It would certainly seem that there is some relationship between environment and events, and if indeed there is such a relationship, then the idea of this environment of furniture on wheels is that it should provoke a greater awareness of what is happening, and above all, a greater awareness of their own creativity and freedom, through its neutrality and mobility, through its being amorphous and chameleon-like, I mean through its

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possibility of clothing any emotion without getting involved in it.

Whether this idea or ambition, this proposal of mine succeeded or not this time, is another matter. But there is no doubt that sooner or later something will be done towards the chance of putting on one's own house every day, as we put on our clothes every day, as we choose maybe a road along which to walk every day, as we choose a book to read or a dream to go with, as we choose a day to live, within the limits imposed on us by other destinies or other dooms.

I only wished to suggest such thoughts with no intention of entering into the realms of aesthetics, or, as it is called, design.

Ettore Sottsass, Jr.

December 24, 1971

To Nanda, who explained everything to me.