

In the comfort of your own home

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«The modernist ideology of the comfort of a home or a place is at its core entangled with the broader concept of ownership and consumption. But insofar as a critique of the home is concerned with its constitutive external conditions, it should be equally concerned with its internal effects — with affect, with desire.»

IN THE COMFORT OF
YOUR OWN HOME
Ann-Kathrin Eickhoff

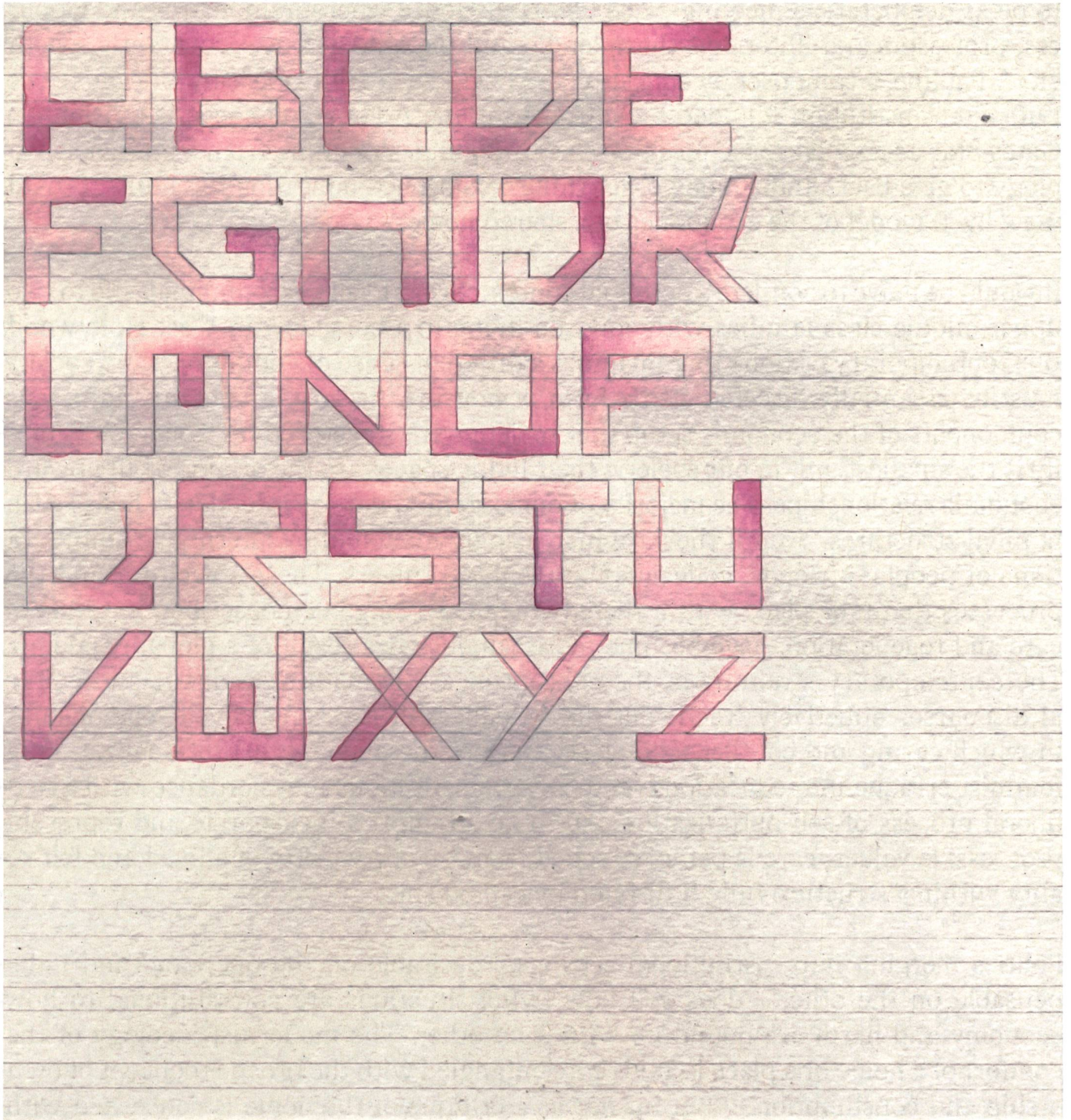
The item of concern was an element of furnishing — the wallpaper. This concern was followed by a letter of complaint, written by Austrian-born American architect Rudolph Michael Schindler to his wife, Pauline Schindler (née Gibling).

Writer and Artist Frances Stark, in her essay «The Architect and the Housewife», imagines the letter something like «I am sure you are familiar with the reasoning for my choice of materials and that what you have done is completely incongruent with my design and destroys the integrity of the structure.»⁽¹⁾ By then, the damage had been done, the paper was already stuck to the wall. In a final, fatal condescending and desperate attempt to resurrect the house (and maybe also the relationship) he might, as Stark suggests, have signed it «R. M. Schindler, Architect».⁽²⁾

Having weeded out his own Austrian pre-modern background, having freed himself from the constraints of a bourgeois decor through education, he had left Europe for Chicago in 1914 and was hired by the office of Frank Lloyd Wright in 1918. The Schindler Chace House at 833 N. Kings Road, West Hollywood, designed in 1921 and constructed between November 1921 and May 1922 was intended as «Cooperative Dwelling for Two Young Couples»: his wife Pauline, and another couple, the Chaces.⁽³⁾ Marian Chace had been to college with Pauline, her husband Clyde was an engineer working in construction and was actively involved in further developing Schindler's Slab-Tilt construction for their house. Pauline and Marian had both become pregnant in 1921, before the house had been finished. Pauline's and Michael's son Mark was born in early 1922, by the summer of 1922 the two young families were living at Kings Road.⁽⁴⁾ In 1924 the Chaces moved to Florida, Richard Neutra and his wife and child moved in 1925. By 1927, the Schindlers' relationship had decomposed, seemingly irrevocably, and Pauline left north for Carmel-by-the-Sea, California, where she lived on a communal colony and took up a job editing a magazine called «The Pine Cone», the colony's progressive weekly.

Pauline returned to live at Kings Road in 1938 — in the house dedicated to the idea of cohabitation with another family — and soon began to renovate it, installing the infamous wallpaper and famously painting parts of the home's exterior walls in a radiant pink. I imagine she used a colour similar to Pantone 15-1816 TX Peony. A hint of red pervades the hue, but in the Californian sun the whites come through nicely. The Schindlers finally divorced in 1940. In 1949 the house had been divided by a wall, separating the house from north to west, an employee of Schindler describing it as «[...] if the house stood up by the pressure of opposing wills».⁽⁵⁾

In 1916, Pauline had imagined her family home as «[...] a little joy of a bungalow, on the edge of the woods and mountains near a crowded city, which shall be open just as some people's hearts are open, to friends of all classes and types. I should like it



(fig. a) Anna Calabrese, Little Pink Alphabet for R.M.S., 2021,
pencil and watercolour on paper

to be as democratic a meeting-place like Hull House where millionaires and labourers, professors and illiterates, the splendid and the ignoble, meet constantly together.»⁽⁶⁾ Pauline, a composer by education, had worked at Hull House in Chicago in the 1910s — an institution founded by suffragette Jane Adams and social activist Ellen Gates Star as a social space for inter-class mingling (stemming from a bourgeois ideology to give back) and, among other things, continued education for adults, providing a lived model of the economies of a shared home.

It would be naïve to conflate a potential contemporary form of «communal» life to two upper-middle class families with children living in a bungalow in West Hollywood. But contemporary critique that imagines a different sense of community and society must be essentially directed at the form of housing, because it contains numerous components of the economic setup that societies are structured by. The nuclear family is the smallest unit in our society; their living spaces are the origins of all upward economic relationships. The majority of homes built today are intended to house such familial structures, even if they are increasingly inhabited by alternative configurations of people — friends, colleagues, students, strangers. These structures and the processes that take place within them, which have long been described in terms of care and regeneration, have become more tangible as a result of a global pandemic. The contemporary straining of the concept of «care» within academic and cultural discourses effectively weeds out the messiness of the actual lived relationships in which caring and conflict take place. Despite the ongoing institutionalization of feminist critique into educational and culture institutions in accordance with a neoliberal process of self-optimization and in an attempt to incorporate and represent progressive values, care is being detached from the nitty-gritty of a lived and felt reality within a structure fully infiltrated by capitalism.

Politics merging into institutional settings — desirable on the one hand and indispensable on the other — does veil how living situations are constitutional to how economy and harm are bound up with each other. The modernist ideology of the comfort of a home or a place is at its core entangled with the broader concept of ownership and consumption.⁽⁷⁾ But insofar as a critique of the home is concerned with its constitutive external conditions, it should be equally concerned with its internal effects — with affect, with desire.

Although she came into the picture as a modern woman, Pauline Schindler could be read as a saboteur of the modernist architectural demeanour, probing the threshold between that which is private but could be public; opening up a space similar to that which Lauren Berlant termed an «intimate public», where «[...] one senses that matters of survival are at stake and that collective mediation through narration and audition might provide some routes out of the impasse and the struggle of the present, or

at least some sense that there would be recognition were the participants in the room together.»⁽⁸⁾ Lived experience might counter planning; a critical spatial practice might grow from contemporary social relations that prioritize the collective over the private.

Regarding comfort, there is an ambivalence in connotation between receiving and giving. Being comfortable, which is «[...] equated with a lack of critique and a sleepy incapacity to act critically with regard to one's social and physical environment [...]», the ineffable comfort zone, and creating comfort, being hospitable, caring is seen as an ethical practice.⁽⁹⁾ While caring for your own, or somebody else's body and mind might constitute the basic practice of (self-)care, it's certainly not yet a collective endeavour, not something that makes another form of solidarity or community conceivable.

Lived life was the resource for the Jagonari Educational Resource Centre in Whitechapel, London, developed by the Matrix Feminist Design Co-operative—a collective of female architects formed in 1981 in London and having developed out of the New Architecture Movement (NAM)—in collaboration with a group of Bangladeshi women who would become it's users. Incorporated in 1987, the group applied what they called a «consultative approach» towards a collective design practice. The multi-use building housed rooms for education, as well as cooking, as well as a crèche. Acknowledging how traditional structures in architectural offices reproduce societal hierarchies and are structured by an unequal distribution of ownership, knowledge and skills, they organised themselves as a workers co-operative, developing working practices «[...] possible for more women, including women with a range of personal experiences and backgrounds, to be actively employed in the design of buildings [...]»⁽¹⁰⁾ The strategies employed by Matrix aimed to dissolve the distinction between layperson and expert by «[...] [giving courses on] how to read plans, producing rough three dimensional models for the client group to rearrange, [and] taking groups to visit other buildings for ideas, looking at photographs and pictures [...]».⁽¹¹⁾ Acknowledging the embeddedness of the design process within the lives of the women would be the architectural equivalent of Berlant's «intimate public». But can the modernist tools of planning, design and (self-)criticism dismantle the master's house?

Maybe they have «[a] line running through them, cancelling them in their old form, but still permitting them to go on being read, since we have no other, alternative, better concepts to put in their place, to think with [...]», as described by cultural theorist Stuart Hall, in reference, again, to Jacques Derrida.⁽¹²⁾ Those concepts, tools, education, work in dialectic tension with the warm, the social create a «[...] doubleness, the ambivalence, which is at the heart of identification». Hall continues, «[...] how little role modelling has to do with someone else's actual life, and how much it has to do with our rewriting of that life, into our narratives, with autography; how little it tells us about them, how much about our desire, both for ourselves and for the other; how

inextricably the merging in fantasy, [which] [...] is linked to the awakening of the violence of refusal and rejection from — real or imagined.»⁽¹³⁾

There is an uneasy feeling about dissecting or maybe even discarding certain institutional structures. While institutions and their pedagogies, even in a (self-)critical way, do approach those structures from the inside out, I am left to imagine what an ethics of a warm but not comfortable critique — one which acknowledges the embeddedness and modernist genesis of its tools while not seeing them as eventually irreplaceable, maybe even as temporary, enriched with reference to lived life and affect — might feel like. Messy, probably, because «[...] even with an image of a better good life available to sustain your optimism, it is awkward and it is threatening to detach from what is already not working», keep moving all the same, rewriting the narratives.⁽¹⁴⁾

In 1935 Pauline Schindler received the following letter from John Cage, whom she had met sometime in the years before, handwritten in pencil.

Dearest,

There was a little open space the other day. I was walking and thinking of you in Ojai, an open space of country, and suddenly I knew what wildness was. I [...] felt myself expanding with a big heart till for a moment I was out of my mind and only tremendously alive.

I did not know you were wild and intoxicating. And now I have only very present memories. Life has been short, has only begun. And your hair is some kind of a promise, I don't know of what, perhaps that it will reach your shoulders that I may bury myself in it.

Perhaps I am satisfied that you whom I know are a fragment you are entirely another's. And yet, these days you are always with me.

It is late and I am tired and I love you and want to be with you.

I am sure there is something unexplainably and mysteriously sacred about the Valley, something including evil.

John