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A Wall of Books: The Gender of Natural Colors in Modern Architecture

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This essay examines a decorative convention—the display of books in modern interiors—that appears in both The International Style (1932) by Henry-Russel Hitchcock and Philip Johnson and The Personality of a House (1930) by Emily Post. Looking at books in this way constitutes a partial history of the architectural palette that arises from the privileging of natural over applied finishes. The internal logic of that practice and its class and gender characterizations are discussed in the context of the separation of architecture from interior design. The “natural” palette and its host of attendant conventions is everywhere visible in contemporary architecture and interior design and even helps to define the boundary between the two practices, to explain what is and is not architectural.

Anyone who now wishes to make a study of moral matters opens up for himself an immense field for work. All kinds of individual passions have to be thought through and pursued through different ages, peoples, and great and small individuals; all their reason and all their evaluations and perspectives on things have to be brought into the light. So far, all that has given color to existence still lacks a history.

—Frederick Nietzsche

Architecture is conventional; it conforms to everyday expectations and even stylistic revolutions modify its conventions only slightly, though the least shift can convey subtle distinctions of class, gender, authority, and identity. This essay examines the nuances of one such convention: the decorative display of books in modern interiors. Increases in book production and literacy during the nineteenth century, accompanied by the increased attention of designers to middle-class interiors, made possible the explicit display of books. In this sense, their decorative arrangement serves as one index to the massive cultural shifts of the modern period and they announce the presence of an educated, presumably leisureed, and primarily masculine individual. However, this is not an investigation of that identity for its own sake, but rather an elucidation of the now familiar decorative palette that privileges natural over applied finishes. Shifting the emphasis away from identities and onto concrete practices highlights the logic of such conventions and allows us to distinguish the internal characteristics of such a palette from its social representations. The natural palette, which paradoxically includes applied colors in neutral shades, and its host of attendant conventions is everywhere visible in contemporary architecture and interior design, and it even helps to define the boundary between the two disciplines, to explain what is and is not architectural. The gendered nature of those distinctions adds force to their use, but these distinctions must be understood as mutually defining: The masculine gains clarity by its affiliation with the natural, which in turn gains strength by its affiliation with the polarized schema of gender identities.

As with so many aspects of twentieth-century life, the natural/neutral palette attained its contemporary form in the 1920s and was firmly established as an element of the historical avant-garde. The preference for natural finishes operates in a similar manner as the (neutral) white walls examined by Mark Wigley, as a set of decorative protocols deeply enough established to avoid scrutiny, and yet just as often disregarded by its advocates. Henry-Russel Hitchcock and Philip Johnson captured the matter-of-fact character of the convention in their book derived from The International Style Exhibition of 1932, describing it in the section titled “The Avoidance of Applied Decoration”:

At present applied color is used less. The color of natural surfacing materials and the natural metal color of detail is definitely preferred. Where the metal is painted, a dark neutral tone minimizes the apparent weight of the window frame. In surfaces of stucco, white or off-white, even where it is obtained with paint, is felt to constitute the natural color. The earlier use of bright color had value in attracting attention to the new style, but it could not long remain pleasing. It ceased to startle and began to bore; its mechanical sharpness and freshness became rapidly tawdry. If architecture is not to resemble billboards, color should be both technically and psychologically permanent.

While the errors, exaggerations, and omissions of the exhibition have been examined and debated since its inception, the fact remains that it produced a startlingly successful manual of style, similar in approach to the numerous home and interior design manuals that preceded it. The International Style promoted a highly refined and
selective taste that relied directly on the distinction between natural and applied color, explicitly deploring the artifice and impermanence of paint, and boldly claiming the status of a natural finish for white and off-white tones. Those conventions continue to persuade. The logic of the natural/neutral palette still appears in contemporary "high-tech" buildings and expensive consumer products, visible also throughout architecture, interior design, and shelter magazines. It is not the only decorative palette that is observed, but it retains a particular authority. It is the palette of architecture in its "return to basics," resonating with the environmental, the preindustrial, and somewhat paradoxically, with the primitive, known equally well for bright colors. It is the ethic to which the rappel a l'ordre calls the discipline, whether to the Great White City of 1893, to the neue sachlichkeit of the 1920s, or to the neo-avant-garde of the 1990s.

A design palette implies both the specific combination of materials, finishes, colors, and other elements by which a decorative convention is conveyed and the concepts or criteria with which it is presented and discussed. As such, palettes constitute an ethic in the broad sense described by David Lachterman "as the settled characteristic way human beings have of acting in the world or of comporting themselves toward one another or toward themselves (for example as teachers and students)." This use of the term ethical does not mean moral, but more nearly habitual or conventional, and from that perspective, a design ethic defines the topics with which architects must work and which they ignore at their peril.

In accord with the specific proposition of this essay—that a wall of books, even colorful ones, can belong to the natural/neutral palette—Hitchcock and Johnson extended the ethic of natural color to the decorative use of books, invoking the logic of function to explain them and illustrating them with Johnson's own New York apartment designed by Mies van der Rohe in 1930. They explained that "the use of natural materials and of such contrasts between different walls as structure and function easily provide is more satisfactory (than colored paint). There is no better decoration than a wall of book-filled shelves." (See Figure 1.) Books introduce colored elements into a room without the artifice of painting the walls or draping fabric. Moreover, their colors endure and derive from the materials and craftsmanship of the bindery. They convey the discipline of their production and the authority of their use, implying both literary activities and the leisure, means, and education to pursue them.

This attention to books may appear exaggerated since the Johnson apartment provides almost the only mention of books in The International Style publication and the passage might simply be read as a means of making that personal image relevant, and of including it in the show. In fact, their book barely deals with interiors at all, conforming to the already strong separation between architecture and interior design. Nevertheless, the appearance of the passage about books in a work devoted to the elimination of applied decoration in architecture suggests the strength of the decorative convention. If we turn to any number of other works documenting the evolution of the modern interior, such as Paul Frankl's New Dimensions (1928), Roberto Aloi's L'Arredamento Moderno (1939), James and Katherine Ford's The Modern House in America (1940), or George Nelson's Tomorrow's House (1945), we find that among the spare and clean interiors, nearly a third of the living rooms documented in those works contain significant walls of books. Along with the single painting hung on the white wall and the book or magazine on the coffee table, the bookcase constitutes a standard decorative element of the modern interior (Figures 2–4). Books are among the few objects that survive the elimination of decoration claimed by the historical avant-garde, the elimination Le Corbusier attributed to the white wall: "Put on it anything dishonest or in bad taste—it hits you in the eye. It is rather like an X-ray of beauty. It is a court of assize in permanent session. It is the eye of truth."
is striking that, despite their colorful variety, books seem almost universally to pass the scrutinizing test of the white wall. Because of their status as items of use and refinement, books are deemed honest, tasteful, and true.

Modern families acquire many kinds of books—cookbooks, literary works, manuals, encyclopedias, pulp fiction, finely bound sets—and they all require storage. Smaller houses have little or no room for dedicated libraries, and the multipurpose nature of modern planning argues for their inclusion in rooms of other uses. But they needn't have resided in the more public rooms. That kind of collective decision required the multiple and overlapping justifications essential for any strong convention; nor need they have resided in open bookcases. It is noteworthy that the only other bookcase shown by Hitchcock and Johnson, one designed by Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret in the Ville d'Avray (1929), conceals the books with sliding wooden doors. Those books apparently did not pass the test of the white wall. The more uniform, natural finish of the wood was preferred to the colorful variety of book bindings, though the doors were slid partly open for the photograph (Figure 5).

The closed bookcase has its own history, traceable to the time when books were rare and required protection. As Edith Wharton described it in The Decoration of Houses, the "natural bookcase was a chest with a strong lock." The open and decorative display of books only became common with their increased production and availability in the eighteenth and, especially, the nineteenth centuries. The decorative convention derived initially from private libraries where different forms of storage and their decoration had been explored by those privileged enough to own substantial collections. Books still suggest something of that aristocratic provenance, and their public display in the homes of the middle class—designed or not—owes much to that formation (Figures 6 and 7). As the numbers of books, the kinds of literature, and literacy itself expanded, so too did the means of storage and display, as well as the social meaning of books. Like the displays of other collections—ceramics, stuffed animals, and musical recordings—objects are deployed, in part, to represent the character of the occupants, but books exceed the personal statement and have attained the status of an objet-type, a decorative convention that can be deployed even in the homes of nonreaders. A number of the generous bookcases presented, for example, in Ford and Ford's Modern House in America stood empty at the time of the photograph, while the decorator's practice of buying books in large lots to fill such shelves is well known.

Two aspects of the decorative formation of concern to this inquiry are the representation of architectural authenticity and the development of interior design as a distinct and separate practice in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. These two aspects
are deeply intertwined: When decorative elements are deemed artificial, they and their advocates are excised from mainstream architectural practice, and displaced into interior design. The resistance of books to that displacement, even in decorative application, suggests other distinctions by which plainly decorative elements can remain architectural. Certainly the actual reading of books preserves their affiliation with other objects of utility, but the strongly polarized conventions of modern gender roles play their part as well. Although interior design constitutes one of the many divisions of labor within the modern building trades, the distinction is a highly gendered one, in which the activities and individuals engaged in it are implicitly assumed to be feminine. The gender connotation derives partly from the fact that women dominate the profession of interior design, a situation conditioned by the removal of men and their work from the home in the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries. Nor was the feminization of the household or of interior design initially viewed as a problem. Elsie de Wolfe, the first self-professed interior designer, noted that situation proudly in her sign initialy viewed as a problem. Elsie de Wolfe, the first professional advocate of interior design, a situation conditioned by the removal of men and their works from the home in the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries. Nor was the feminization of the household or of interior design initially viewed as a problem. Elsie de Wolfe, the first self-professed interior designer, noted that situation proudly in her arguments for the establishment of interior design as a feminine discipline unto itself.

We take it for granted that every woman is interested in houses—that she either has a house in course of construction, or dreams of having one, or has had a house long enough wrong to wish it right. And we take it for granted that this American home is always the woman’s home: a man may build and decorate a beautiful house, but it remains for a woman to make a home of it for him. It is the personality of the mistress that the home expresses. Men are forever guests in our homes, no matter how much happiness they may find there.13

With the steady transformation of the middle-class household from a workplace to a site of consumption and display, new problems of organization and design ensued. Following the pioneering work of Catherine Beecher’s American Woman’s Home in 1869, the “science” of home economics addressed the new kinds of work present in the home.14 Paralleling that development, guidebooks such as Edith Wharton and Ogden Codman’s Decoration of Houses of 1897 and Elsie de Wolfe’s House in Good Taste of 1913 offered guidance in the form of room-by-room analyses of upper-class houses, referring to the great houses and palaces of Europe for decorative authority. That room-by-room or piece-by-piece organization constitutes a primary method for the transmission of decorative conventions whose practices cannot be as clearly articulated by statements of general principle.

Room by Room

The room-by-room, narrative form of treatise first appeared in the architectural literature with Le Camus de Mézières elaborate discussion of the French hôtel (1780) and seemed to form the necessary response to the increasing specialization of buildings and rooms. It further reflected the changed understanding of architecture characterized in Claude Perrault’s treatises of the late seventeenth century, which were responding to the discovery that there were no fixed or absolute proportions for the classical orders, nor even fixed models of the orders themselves. He generalized those observations to distinguish between positive and arbitrary forms of beauty, effectively redefining the task of the architect as an arbiter of taste:

In architecture there is positive beauty and beauty that is only arbitrary, even though it appears to be positive due to prejudice, against which one guards oneself with great difficulty. It is also true that even though good taste is founded on a knowledge of both kinds of beauty, a knowledge of arbitrary beauty is usually more apt to form what we call taste and is that which distinguishes true architects from the rest.16

The articulation and control of arbitrary beauties is the purpose of conventions. Perrault himself argued for a reasonable compromise in the determination of proportions, preserving, in effect, the taste of his day. But even his positive beauties, which include the “richness of the materials” presumably in their natural finish, are subject to changes of taste. The authority and longevity of a given style of building is governed as much by its underlying narratives, by the familiar stories of power and identity, as its inherent features. In the absence of traditional correspondences, such as those attributed to proportion, manuals of style like The Decoration of Houses or The International Style operate through the documentation of specific examples that together make evident an ethic of construction and living. The specific ethic by which books operate as an acceptable form of decoration in The International Style can be discerned in the development of the modern interior since Le Camus de Mézières.

Despite de Wolfe’s claim of primacy, interior decoration in various forms had been practiced professionally by tradesmen like wallpaperers, upholsterers, and antique-dealers, and equally by architects like Napoleon’s designers, Percier and Fontaine, to whom Siegfried Giedion had traced all the excesses of the nineteenth-century interior.17 According to the canonical histories, the modern movement constituted a reform of those excesses and the development of designs natural to the new conditions of life and means of
production. But in picture after picture of spare modern interiors stripped of any ornamental feature, the wall or cabinet of books appears as one of the only visually complex elements to remain. While the argument about the modern conditions of life certainly explains much of what transpired, it is difficult to fit the colorful wall of books and its decorative deployment into the story.

A critical aspect of the tale is suggested in a collage by Max Ernst that Giedion used for his own extended critique of the nineteenth century interior. The image from Ernst’s surrealist novel, *La femme 100 têtes*, shows a gentleman in a heavily draped and upholstered interior gazing at a bookcase from which looms one of the “hundred headless women.” (See Figure 8.) Giedion used it to explain the “psychic distress” of the overly ornamented room, and we might also see the specifically gendered and sexual nature of that distress, the female apparition in a man’s study. While the bookcase in that lavish interior indicated the scholarly activities of its occupant, it also provides a site for Ernst’s comment on the ambivalent relationship between inhabitants and their habitats. Symbols of identity, like identities themselves, are never simple and inevitably contain what was suppressed in their construction: The feminine wells up in the masculine, and the decorative in the functional. The repressed figure that would loom from the bookcase of the *International Style* would have to be the *cozy*, overly ornamented objects from the homes run by women or perhaps the first feminine figure in western architecture, the slender Ionic column, covered in bright colors and the trophies of ritual sacrifice.

### Natural Color (Finish)

As we have seen, the ethic of decorative reform did not eliminate the wall of books. Books continued to introduce colorful variety into increasingly spare interiors and to convey a variety of corollary stories about tradition, identity, and gender. Indeed, the ethic of reform and simplification was shared across a broad stylistic spectrum, from the Arts and Crafts movement to the scientific eclecticism advocated by Edith Wharton and Elsie de Wolfe, both of which prepared the way for the more severe International Style. In her introduction, De Wolfe recounted a prehistory for the modern home that explained the general ethic: “The virtues of simplicity and reticence in form first came into being, as nearly as we can tell, in the Grotta, the little studio-like apartment of Isabella d’Este, the Marchioness of Mantua, away back in 1496.” She traces a specifically female tradition through Catherine de Vivonne, Marquise de Rambouillet, who perfected the armchair, and to Madame de Pompadour with her use of a simple earthenware service in her gray and white *folie*. The nineteenth century contributed “magic-making” conveniences, while the twentieth century added “measured heat,” “water in abundance, and perfect sanitation and light everywhere.” The criteria of de Wolfe’s simplicity are made explicit when she asks “What is the goal?” and her answer conveys the subtlety of its purpose. “A house that is like the life that goes on within it, a house that gives us beauty as we understand it—and beauty of a nobler kind that we may grow to understand, a house that looks amenity.” That is, a house that looks like the modern life it accommodates, providing authenticity in its representations. She indirectly identifies the immediate sources of that reforming ethic in her summary of the elements with which most women must work: “[Y]ou can take your indiscriminate inheritance of Victorian rosewood, of Eastlake walnut and cocobolo, your pickle-and-plum Morris furniture, and make a civilized interior by placing it right, and putting detail at the right points.”

The discussion of authenticity and utility had found its moment of crystallization in the English reform movement of the mid-century that had produced the remnants with which de Wolfe was contending. William Morris, John Ruskin, and their circles profoundly altered the discussion of domestic design, and their ideas were broadcast across America through Charles Locke Eastlake’s *Hints on Household Taste* of 1868 and Oscar Wilde’s 10-month lecture tour on the “English Renaissance” in 1882. In the many variations of Wilde’s lecture, eventually titled “The House Beautiful,” he too followed the room-by-room format, describing suitable materials and finishes for
each element of the reformed house. On a number of occasions, he illustrated the unity of beauty and craftsmanship, which was the hallmark of the movement, in a discussion of books that explains their decorative appeal: "An old library is one of the most beautifully colored things imaginable; the old colors are toned down and they are so well bound, for whatever is beautiful is well made."24

Neither Morris nor Wilde nor Eastlake argued against all use of applied color; each discussed the selection and use of paint colors at length. But with respect to the exterior, Wilde followed Ruskin in his distrust of painted buildings (and admiration for the Venetian Gothic). It is Ruskin’s warning about exterior paint that indicates one of the operational principles by which natural and applied colors are distinguished.

The true colours of architecture are those of natural stone, and I would fain see them taken advantage of to the full... [L]et the painter’s work be reserved for the shadowed loggia and inner chamber.

This is the true and faithful way of building. Where this cannot be, the device of external colouring may indeed be employed without dishonour—but it must be with the warning reflection that a time will come when such aids will pass away and when the building will be judged in its lifelessness, dying the death of the dolphin. Better the less bright, more enduring fabric. The transparent alabasters of San Miniato and the mosaics of Saint Mark’s are more warmly filled and more brightly touched by every return of morning and evening rays, while the hues of the Gothic cathedrals have died like the iris out of the cloud, and the temples, whose azure and purple once gleamed above the Grecian promontory, stand in their faded whiteness like snows which the sunset has left cold.25

This is a real distinction of craft; the demands on exterior finishes differ substantially from those of the interior, the facts of endurance and weathering draw a line precisely between colorful natural materials and applied colors. Fifty years of experimentation with modern polychromy had taught nineteenth-century architects the importance of "structural" colors, not only through the experiences with paint in their colder, wetter climate, but from the recognition that the applied coloring of ancient and medieval buildings had been lost to time.26

But what, operationally, is a natural color? The processes of finishing, of dressing, cutting, polishing, curing, sealing, and so on, can modify the visual appearance of materials every bit as much as any opaque coating. In practice, materials like wood, stone, brick, metal, and leather grown or produced through natural processes are valued as such when their finishes enhance or at least do not obscure the complexity, depth, or variety of their appearance. Technically, there is little difference between a stain and a paint, except that the latter obscures the material, reducing it to the thin, surface color of the finely ground substances suspended in the binder. But many metals have little visual depth, and some, like aluminum for example, have almost no visual complexity nor are they especially valued in their weathered states, though they do possess a coherence of sheen not achieved by aluminum paint. The natural can only be understood as a somewhat flexible category of finishes, not by a single principle of use, manufacture, or appearance. The fact that a family of paint colors—neutrals, ochres, and other earth colors—fit within the definition of natural is only partly explained by their original manufacture with naturally occurring mineral compounds. Though they are opaque surface coatings, they resemble the tones produced in natural materials by weathering. It is little wonder that the efforts of Owen Jones, Gottfried Semper, or Adolf Loos to regulate the logic of coating materials turns on the question of imitation.27 Excluding it, as Loos’s Law of Cladding sought to do, leads directly to the difficult pursuit of authenticity that characterizes the natural/neutral palette. Admitting the imitative practices of faux-bois or faux-marbre, for example, opens the door to all applied ornament.

These questions are not meant to eliminate or undermine the concept of natural materials and finishes in construction or design. They derive from a host of very real physical and phenomenal observations and, more importantly perhaps, they hold a useful place in the everyday discussion of materials and finishes. As such, they offer one of the sites or topics with which architecture must contend, the topics that architects should approach with humility because they result from the kinds of broad cultural negotiation to which public constructions aspire.28 That does not mean that critical investigations should be suspended by reifying the everyday or the primitive. Shifting authority to “other” sources of that kind is precisely the problem. The difficult question raised by the authority of the natural has two aspects, the one concerns the opposition between the natural and the applied/artificial, the other concerns the related opposition between architecture and interior design. Why are applied, surface colors allied with artifice in the opposition to the equally contrived finishing of natural materials? And why are similar terms used in the opposition between two disciplines whose actual work so often overlaps and coincides?
Masculine Color

The authority of the natural finishes of wood, metal, and stone are only partly explained by the demands of craft, the phenomenological structure of finishes, or the concern for future generations. The privileging of the natural over the artificial reaches back at least to the late eighteenth century, while the mistrust of color's artifice extends further to the aesthetic arguments about diego e colore beginning in the Renaissance. The affiliation of applied coloring with the changeable qualities of matter and its ability to alter form aligns it with the strongly gendered hylomorphic (matter-form) tradition traced by David Summers from nineteenth-century aesthetic theory back to the Aristotelian or Pythagorean contraries with which Heidegger began his own discussion of the "Origin of the Work of Art." It was the relentless and absolute nature of those oppositions that concerned Heidegger; he felt that the affiliation of matter-form with the irrational-rational, illogical-logical, and subject-object produced a conceptual machinery that nothing is capable of withstanding. Summers extended that observation to include the female-male opposition that he finds at the origin of the art historical project, defined as the attention to form, and he hoped that art history might simply dispense with such characterizations. But, of course, these are vastly more than conceptual schema. They received a powerful cultural urgency with the destabilization of traditional gender roles in the early nineteenth century and the shifting understanding of subjectivity. Along with changing gender roles, modes of production, and settlement patterns, that period witnessed the beginnings of the polychromy dispute in architecture and the great male renunciation of fashion and color in clothing. The professionalization of architecture developed in the cross-currents of these shifts, and it has remained defensive and ambivalent about both color and fashion ever since.

The immediate questions about the preference for natural color and the decorative use of books are not wholly answered by such linear histories of influence, but must be understood as part of continuously negotiated cultural conventions. From Wilde's House Beautiful tour of 1882 to the International Style Exhibition of 1932, those preferences were shaped in the complex interaction between the rapidly consolidated practices of interior design, the changing roles of women and characterizations of femininity, and the formation of modern homosexual identity through the homophobic fear of male effeminacy, itself given focus by Wilde's trial and conviction in 1895. Remarkably polarized gender characterizations have developed since that time. The least traces of male effeminacy—extravagance, sensitivity, weakness, and so on—are taken as proof of sexual preference and so the characterizations of masculinity acquire equally rigid and cartoonlike definitions. The confusion and conflation of public behavior with private acts suggests the same drive for authenticity in representation that privileges the natural in architecture.

In the stereotypical convention, those elements that are strong and long-lasting—walls, windows, doors, roofs, and natural materials—are considered masculine and architectural, while those that are short-lived due to wear or fashion—curtains, paint, furniture, and so on—are assigned to the feminine discipline of interior design. As to the precise effects of homophobia on the subject of this essay, it is worth noting the degree to which Hitchcock and Johnson skillfully operated according to the stereotype of homosexual connoisseurship and applied the homophobic exclusion of artifice and changeable finishes in the canonical palette of the International Style. The contradictions inherent in this process confused the internal logic of practices, their public discourse and expression, and the identities of critics and architects themselves.

As suggested initially, we misunderstand such characterizations if we expect them to operate in one direction only, as social categories simply expressed or inscribed in physical constructions, limiting the discussion to questions of social justice and adjustment. To act as the site for such interpretations artifacts must exhibit some difference or distinction onto which projections can be cast. More importantly, such projections also help to define identities; we are, in part, the people who wear these kinds of clothes, live in these kinds of neighborhoods and buildings, or drive these kinds of cars. In this sense, architecture and interior design do not merely express, but provide the means by which the precise characteristics of class or gender are constantly discovered and policed. Natural materials offer many such criteria of distinction—durability, variety of finish, visual depth—and each feature can be opposed to some other aspect, fitting them into the extended and hierarchical family of hylomorphic pairings: straight versus curved, simple versus complex, reason versus emotion, and male versus female.

The contemporary polarization of the natural and the artificial aligns ornament and applied colors with artifice, complexity, curviness, and femininity, building on the now apparently common-sense distinction made in German aesthetic theory between the "Core-form" and "Art-form," between the essential, working aspect of an artifact and its supplemental, aesthetic features. The fully gendered distrust of ornament is the dark side of aesthetics. It informed the growing ethic of simplicity, as expressed in German building culture, for example, by Heinrich Tessenow, when he observed that "ornament has, and this is said with some apprehension,
a lady-like quality." Not surprisingly, he was trying to distinguish "artistic" from "aesthetic" qualities, following the terms of the Arts and Crafts movement to which he had been converted through the writings of Morris and Ruskin, and then Hemann Mutheusius's 1904 report on The English House. Tessenow, however, recognized the historical nature of his characterization, noting that "the actual value of ornament can be found in the same place as the actual values of lady-like qualities... Today real lady-like qualities—distinctly opposed to feminine ones—are rare; we lack the necessary appreciation for them." "Lady-like" ornament, in common with the clothing and manners of the eighteenth century courtier for example, was simply out of place in the modern building.

But of course the ornament of the nineteenth century differs radically from that of the eighteenth century. If Giedion made no other point, it was that we had to be redeemed from the excesses of nineteenth-century industrialized ornament. The proliferation of mass-produced decorative goods and the successive movements of reform and education are bound together; manuals of interior design and programs of public art education attempt to manage or suppress the proliferation of kitsch, camp, and low art. Canons of taste like The International Style must everywhere negotiate the political and class distinctions inherent in this process. As Hitchcock and Johnson explained about their work, "[T]he current style sets a high, but not impossible standard for decoration: better none at all unless it be good. The principle is aristocratic rather than puritanical." Oscar Wilde would have agreed with the standard if not the specifics of the style. Ethid Wharton's book has also been criticized as a design guide only for the wealthy, while Elsie de Wolfe used her career as a professional designer to transform herself into an English peer. Like gender formations, the "aristocratic" standard of decoration is both an emblem or badge and a shifting collection of principles and artifacts with which it is discovered, negotiated, and enforced.

A remarkable book that illustrates these methods and exemplifies the fully developed class and gender characteristics of interior design is Emily Post's book, The Personality of a House: The Blue Book of Home Design and Decoration, which was published just prior to the mounting of Hitchcock and Johnson's exhibition. This essay was initially conceived as a comparison between The Personality of a House and The International Style, both written at the same time, in the same city, but on opposite sides of the stylistic dispute that still divides building practices. They both offer close observations about the taste cultures of their day, and style notwithstanding, their similarities suggest the kind of broad agreement about ways of living and building that has been characterized as an ethic in this essay.

Emily Post is best known for her immensely successful guide to manners, The Etiquette (later known as The Blue Book of Social Usage), which has been carried on as a vast publishing operation since 1922, and made her one of the more popular radio personalities of the time. She was the daughter of Bruce Price, the architect of Tuxedo Park and the Frontenac Hotel in Quebec City, and after an early divorce supported herself by writing articles and designing interiors. In a different time, she would have been an architect and despite her success as an arbiter of manners, her son always claimed that the book about design was her favorite work. The Etiquette and The Personality of a House mirror one another remarkably, both advancing strong standards of taste founded on the principles of charm, comfort, and accommodation, each carefully explained through example. Like its predecessors, The Personality of a House outlines a series of broad principles and then proceeds room by room, referring to the English Georgian as an exemplar and also local examples, including Post's own work, for the specifics of American usage and construction. Her general ethic, "emptiness is always an essential of classic beauty and dignity," is virtually identical to de Wolfe's "simplicity and reticence," and the "better none at all" of The International Style. Although she devotes one chapter to the formal rules for color combination, implicit terms for the distinction between natural and artificial colors are developed through out the book. They receive special emphasis in her chapter on the design of "A Room for a Man," in which she articulates the now familiar gendered assumptions about colors, finishes, and books that had crystallized since the turn of the century:

All plain wood-lined rooms are good, as are also walls painted or papered in neutral tones of putty, or sand, or olive-gray, or wrapping-paper brown, made colorful by many books (red ones!). For a man's study—unless he never reads—the most furnishing decorations are well-filled book-shelves, not too closely matched. Odd lots of books, reference books in calf or leather, or at most, sets of favorite authors in cloth bindings, are far more suggestive of the man who reads than are even rows of splendidly-tooled bindings—unless bindings are his hobby. (See Figures 9 and 10.)

Elsie de Wolfe, too, understood books as a means of introducing colorful variety into the neutral/natural palette acceptable for the masculine stereotype of the library. "Here, if anywhere, you would think a monotony of brown wood would be obvious, but think of thousands of books with brilliant bindings... Can't you see that this cypress room is simply glowing with color." Books provide a
subversive decoration, introducing colorful variety under the guise of craftsmanship and scholarship, apparently slipping a feminine note of decoration into obviously masculine interiors.

Observing this formation does not demonstrate its universality, nor that such characterizations of gender are in any way essential; men and women of many different preferences can choose to display such masculine characteristics. The masculinity of the library was, however, long in formation. In Muthesius's room-by-room analysis of the English house, he devoted a section to the "library as smoking-room and male preserve," observing the lack of a specific work-room for men as a striking difference from continental homes. He attributed that fact to the removal of male employment from the house, leaving the library as the final residue of male work in the English (and American) home, and it becomes the natural location for the retreat of men from the rule of a feminized household. The affiliation of masculinity with walls of books is then partly accidental, and similar observations could be made in the contemporary American home about walls of tools (in the shop or garage) and walls of sports paraphernalia or hunting trophies (in the den). But the importance of color in the convention of the
line library cannot be overstated. In *Style-Architecture and Building-Art* Muthesius had earlier observed that because previous styles of architecture had no distinctly interior decoration, transferring exterior features to the interior, that "color becomes preeminent" in the modern interior, "for we are aware that it, more than architectural form, acts strongly and directly, and creates an ambience."47

The narrow convention observed by Emily Post still remains recognizable and legible today. The similarities between de Wolfe's library, Emily Post's "Room for a Man," and the room of *The International Style* exemplify the fully formed concept of modern color and finish in which simple, achromatic surfaces and natural materials are deemed masculine by virtue of their authenticity (or are they authentic by virtue of their masculinity?). That identity is remarkably independent of style, and it continues to characterize designers, occupants, and finishes to this day, warping and restricting design practices with its definitions. The opposition of natural finishes to applied colors derives its energy from resistance to the artificiality of "taste," which is affiliated with intuition, irrationality, and the feminine. The repeated efforts to develop a definitive science of color effects, either functionally, linguistically, or psychologically are all efforts to excise such subjectivities from architecture. The fear of taste also exacerbates the gap between the practical applications of color, which require the attention to arbitrary elements noted by PERRAULT, and the discourse which seeks to explain them. Colors are selected and applied in projects everywhere with little of the critical discussion received by the forms to which they are applied.

In a subsequent section of her book, Emily Post discussed the construction of "Faked Bindings for Decoration" to artificially produce the *look* of masculine amenity.48 (See Figure 11.) This practice, and the decorative deployment of "real" books too, operate not according to the logic by which formal architectural principles are explained, but according to the negotiation of identity and its discovery through representations. As illustrated in the bookcase collage by MAX ERNST, that negotiation involves both the inspecting gaze of the occupant and the return *look* of the interior. A wall of books not only appears masculine, but reassures its occupant that he or she is conforming to the complex image of rationality, literacy, and authenticity that books convey. Again, the emphasis here is not on identities per se, but on the tension between the decorative urge to include a variety of color and the defensive exclusion of explicitly decorative practices. The logic of color conventions cannot be grasped by theories of identity without an equivalent consideration of decorative variety and the attention to occasion, both of which require narrative forms for their exploration.

The selection of colors and finishes is always an exercise of taste, and any such acknowledgment makes evident the deep affiliation of architecture with the other arts of convention—dressing, dining, dancing, or other activities. That perhaps is the deepest fear expressed by the privileging of natural over applied color: that acknowledgment of the arts of convention and the necessity of timeliness would undermine a profession dedicated defensively to timelessness. This is not an apology for individual tastes, but the observation that authenticity is simply a matter of appearances. It is through the discriminations of taste, shaped according to class and gender, as well as to form, material, and workmanship, that we discriminate among the qualities of materials and their finishes. The composition of material and color palettes is among the most demanding forms of discrimination required of architects and designers, and for which the wall of book filled shelves might serve as an apt reminder.

**Notes**

13. Ford and Ford, *Modern House in America*, pp. 21, 48. I have been unable to locate the reference for an article from a shelter magazine of the late 1980s that discussed the dilemma posed to interior designers of that period by the numbers of nonreaders among their newly wealthy clients. They wondered if it was ethical to decorate the rooms of such clients with books.
15. Nicolas Camus de Mézières, *The Genius of Architecture; or, the Anatomy of the Art with Our Sensations* (1780), (Santa Monica: The Getty Center for the history of Art and Humanities, 1992).
20. Ibid., p. 12.
21. Ibid., p. 15.
22. Ibid., p. 15.
32. Ibid., p. 30.
34. Hitchcock and Johnson, *The International Style*, p. 75.
38. Post, *The Personality of a House*, p. 406. The reference to red books comes from an anecdote that she relates earlier in the book. "This reminds me of a story that is true: The wife of an eminent author who had enlarged their library living-room was annoyed by the disturbing emptiness of so many of the new bookshelves. So she went to a store that had advertised cheap editions and asked for 'lots of books.' Said the clerk: 'Which books may I get you?' To the horror of the clerk, she answered, 'Red ones!' She giggled afterwards at the clerk's obvious estimate of her literary taste," p. 188.