

# There's No Piece Like Home

*Artist-built houses and interiors can be the ultimate convergence of design and sculpture* **BY HILARIE M. SHEETS**



PHOTO BY ALEX SLADE/COURTESY THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, LOS ANGELES

Jorge Pardo built his house, 4166 Sea View Lane, in 1998, with an ear canal in mind. "When you move from one room to another," he says, "you have a glimpse of where you've just been."

Sometimes living in art can be less than hospitable. In his famous glass house, designed as a country retreat in Plano, Illinois, for Dr. Edith Farnsworth, Mies van der Rohe forbade curtains and provided only a single hook on which to hang clothes. Yet living in a work of art need not be so ascetic. As artists are increasingly using architecture as a point of departure, the cross-pollination between the disciplines is spawning inventive living spaces that can be highly conducive to the business of life, while leaving plenty of room for the mind to wonder.

Andrea Zittel continually tests the parameters of conventional living by designing intimate, multipurpose interiors injected with her fantasies of how to do things. Her "Comfort Units," for instance, are large, plush, fortlike beds with service carts that roll up to the openings on either side, so that they can be converted into a desk or vanity or kitchen. "The idea is that you could do everything that you need to do without leaving the security and comfort of your bed," says Zittel, who installed such a room in her Williamsburg, Brooklyn, row house, where she lives when she's not working on her homestead cabin, near Joshua Tree, in the California desert.



For Vinyl Milford House, 1994, Allan Wexler retrofitted a storage shed into a Western version of a Japanese home.

COURTESY HOWARD FELDMAN/FINE ARTS, NEW YORK

One of many tiny shacks built by settlers in the 1940s and '50s in return for a five-acre parcel of land, the 700-square-foot cabin—which Zittel began using as her western laboratory in 2000—has been inspirational to her investigations of personal freedom. She customized her kitchen to address the tyranny of domestic chores. It has a table with a grill in the middle so she and guests can cook their food while sitting down to eat. She eliminated the need for dishes by carving indentations into the table that can hold the food and then simply be wiped clean with a sponge. In much the same way that she experiments with making all-purpose uniforms that she wears for months at a time, she may eat one dish exclusively for a year, such as veggie burgers or, currently, tacos. "When I get sick of the tacos, I'll probably redesign the table to hold a built-in wok for stir fry," she says, laughing.

When she works with people on commissions, though, Zittel encourages them to assert control over what they want. She finds it interesting that many won't go very far—perhaps needing that Miesian authority of the artist.

Yet Lisa Ivorian Gray was willing to collaborate actively with Zittel in customizing one of the artist's "Homestead Units"—a compact, 120-square-foot structure assembled from modular

glass and wood panels in a manner similar to Zittel's own cabin—into an office that is set up at the end of Gray's SoHo loft and even has an extension to house her mountain dog. "It's this little office full of hope and promise. I love to be cosseted away in it," says Gray, who produces limited-edition artworks for the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York and was given this piece by her husband, as a wedding present, when she started to work independently. "It has made me more organized because it's an absolutely beautiful work of art, and I feel astoundingly guilty when it gets messy," she continues. It's also easier to stay tidy now, she notes, because of Zittel's incredibly efficient shelving system for binders and the plastic sheets hanging from the wall to accommodate current projects. The only less-than-exceptionally-functional aspect is the corrugated steel roof, which can be problematic for cell phones.

**A**llan Wexler doesn't so much reinvent daily routines as draw attention to them. For *Vinyl Milford House* (1994), which was stationed for years in the backyard of his home on the North Fork of Long Island until he moved, Wexler retrofitted a utilitarian storage shed into a Western version of a Japanese home. The single room could be transformed from a living into a sleeping space by rolling furniture in and out of the walls, which had cratelike extensions on the exterior to cocoon the objects. "You could empty the space depending on what function you needed, and because it made you aware of those decisions and details, it ritualized those everyday actions," says Wexler, who used it as a house for himself as well as for visitors. "You slid the furniture out, and the wheels would kind of creak. It created theater out of our normal existence."

Another piece that slides out of the wall and is still in active use today is Wexler's *Parsons Kitchen*, which serves as the reception space for openings and lectures held in the architecture gallery at Parsons School of Design in Greenwich Village. When the school invited him to do a kitchen in 1994, Wexler found a shaped void behind a wall made of Sheetrock; he opened it up and built a plywood construction that tucks in flush with the wall, but when rolled out, it converts into a counter, sink, and shelves stocked with wineglasses and snack food.

"Part of the design for Allan was turning those cabinets into sort of Cornelian boxes," says Peter Wheelwright, chair of the department of architecture, interior design, and lighting, who confirms that the kitchen gets quite a workout.

The house Jorge Pardo built on a hill in Los Angeles in 1998, under the auspices of the Museum of Contemporary Art, enjoyed status as a sculpture during its public exhibition before he took up residency there. "The exhibition was a framing device to make people think about what it might be like to live in a house like this," says Pardo, who responded to the challenge of the steeply sloped site by torquing a chain of rooms, which shift among seven levels, around a central courtyard. While the house preserves its privacy from the front, its rooms are lined with glass windows and doors opening to the interior garden, and the richly striated wood walls and ceilings, as well as the bright palette of fabrics and furnishings, converse with the colors of the garden.

"You can be in the courtyard and see into the rest of the house and have an overview of Santa Monica while maintain-

ing privacy from the outside," says Pardo. "Within the house, you're constantly moving through different levels, which structures your point of view. It's built like an ear canal, so when you move from one room to another, you have a glimpse of where you've just been. If someone's in another room, you can also usually get a glimpse of them," he laughs. "If you want privacy, you can put the curtains up; if not, you go, 'Come over here!' It's very practical and reflexive."

Max Protetch, whose Chelsea gallery concentrates on the convergence of art and architecture, was recently asked by the nonprofit group Habitat for Humanity to help get important architecture firms involved in building housing for the poor. "I said the entire architecture world thinks what you do is great, but they haven't done anything because essentially the buildings you build are ugly," recounts Protetch, who feels that the great architects of our time could build innovative housing inexpensively, if given the opportunity.

Protetch cites as a model Samuel Mockbee, an architect who taught at Alabama's Auburn University and with his students built houses, gratis, for poor families in rural Hale County, Alabama. "They built incredibly inventive and extremely beautiful



Andrea Zittel's *A-Z Comfort Room*, installed in her Brooklyn home in 1997.

houses out of recycled materials," says Protetch, who represents Mockbee's estate (he died in 2001). In a film about the architect's Rural Studio, people who grew up in his homes talk about how half the children in the Hale County area turned to crime because they felt they had no hope, but living in these houses changed the way they perceived their future.

"Before moving into their new houses, Mockbee's clients had been living in shacks without plumbing or heating," says Andrea Oppenheimer Dean, author of *Rural Studio: Samuel Mockbee and an Architecture of Decency* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2002). "They were all overjoyed with their bright, cheerful new houses." When Dean recently asked Lucy Harris—who lives in a Mockbee house that has walls made of compressed carpet panels and a dramatic, quirky tower enclosing her bedroom—if she thought it was too wacky-looking, Harris replied, "No, I like that it's different. Never seen anything like it." ■

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