

MacGuffin

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[MacGuffin explores ways of publishing the domestic interior in the Italian magazine *Domus* through a series of articles by Ettore Sottsass and photographs by Giorgio Casali projecting a new understanding of contemporary practices.]

Alfred Hitchcock developed a narrative technique known as the MacGuffin, a plot device to construct the central focus of a story that could easily disappear or vanish from the main narrative. Hitchcock referred to the MacGuffin as “the thing that spies are after, but the audience doesn’t care,” the thing that seems important, but could end up being just anecdotal.

PONTI’S SHIFT

Historically, domestic interiors have been disseminated in architecture magazines in two essentially recognizable forms, either through photographs of empty spaces, without any signs of occupation, stripped down and bare, with neither objects nor people, or through photographs of interiors with objects placed with extreme precision, including people frozen in motion as part of the scenery with forced naturalness but still realistic, often played by hired actors. Both groups delineated the stereotypical image of mid-century modern in the United States as defined by the photographic culture of domestic interiors created by Ezra Stoller, Julius Schulman, Marvin Rand, and Bill Hedrich, just to name a few.

During that same era in Italy, in the years when Gio Ponti was the editor-in-chief of *Domus* (1948-1978), the magazine published a collection of homes which reflect an image of one of the most fruitful periods in interior design, but it took a different tack. The collection of heterogeneous rooms was grouped together under the perspective of the magazine’s editor, who explored the domestic interior from a variety of disciplines linked to design. The editorial work turned into the work of a designer who was constructing, not merely describing, an active eye that transformed reality, not the eye of a viewer who was simply recording reality. In *Domus*, Ponti designed a way of looking via its photographs and photographers.

Domus published article which reported on domestic space using resources including dogs, children playing, open books, people in the background who do not seem to notice the photographer’s presence, lights turned on, and ashtrays filled, an interpretation mediated by architecture photographers who, in *Domus*, combine Gio Ponti’s vision of the domestic interior with an eye partially conditioned by an international aesthetic in order to work towards constructing a narrative

in which each object and each person matters more than the room. Thus, the secondary was made to seem more important, and in the majority of cases, the anecdote seems to be the room, in order to design a collective imaginary.

ETTORE SOTTASS: “SHOW AND TELL ROOMS” “ATELIER ROOMS”

Starting in issue no. 436, *Domus* published a series of articles and columns entitled “*Memoires di panna montanta*” by Ettore Sottsass, where he recorded visits to domestic spaces, the rooms of international cultural figures located in different cities around the world. Sottsass’s selection of photographs, some of which were taken by him and others not, show disorderly interiors, crowded parties, and snippets of life. What all the interiors have in common is that they show places where objects generate friction with the space that contains them and informs about both the architecture and the person who inhabits it. Sottsass is an observer who registers the significance of an event in a fraction of a second mentioned by Henri Cartier-Bresson, seeking to record the unknown. The shot is not fully under his control; he is always ready to capture an ever-changing scene.

The interiors that Sottsass visited serve as prototypical examples of specific situations, models that can be expanded and generalized in contemporary ways of looking, and he accomplishes this through two categories: “Show and Tell Rooms” and “Atelier Rooms.”

The rooms that fall within the category of “Show and Tell Rooms” revolve around a selection of interiors where the person is the orchestra conductor of the objects around them because of either their layout in space or their status as “servants”, or because they are part of a certain design and philosophy. They simultaneously register the occupant and the objects.

In these cases, the objects spin a web of references that reconstruct codes which, in turn, define the featured person in their innermost milieu. While some objects speak about the subject as their owner, others speak about the subject as their designer.

Sottsass spotlights rooms where people are at the core, and they create their own image through their freedom. The subjects do not present themselves as coherent and homogenous but instead with all their contradictions, extravagances, and



Il primo di Sottsass nel 1964, di casa. Nella foto: un'immagine scura, quasi un'istantanea, di un ambiente domestico. In alto a sinistra, un'immagine di un'abitazione con un letto e un tavolo. In basso a sinistra, un'immagine di un'abitazione con un letto e un tavolo.



PARTY
Il primo di Sottsass nel 1964, di casa. Nella foto: un'immagine scura, quasi un'istantanea, di un ambiente domestico. In alto a sinistra, un'immagine di un'abitazione con un letto e un tavolo. In basso a sinistra, un'immagine di un'abitazione con un letto e un tavolo.



NIKI
Il primo di Sottsass nel 1964, di casa. Nella foto: un'immagine scura, quasi un'istantanea, di un ambiente domestico. In alto a sinistra, un'immagine di un'abitazione con un letto e un tavolo. In basso a sinistra, un'immagine di un'abitazione con un letto e un tavolo.



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Figure 1: Image of the article : *Viaggio a occidente: Nr. 1 Che cosa fanno li dentro?* by Ettore Sottsass, *Domus* 436, Mach 1966, pp 46.

sophistication. This personality is portrayed through snapshots and glimpses of domesticity, which is untidy, dirty, and urban in some cases, as a rejection of the hygienic, technical, sleek paradigm promoted by the modern movement. The photograph operates as a mechanism that filters the spectacle of spying on another person's privacy.

Some of the interiors published include the house of U.S. American friends either in huge gatherings or alone, or the house of Joseph Beuys, which Sottsass describes as an “interior in a mutating state, where the objects are subjected to a constant process in which there are fermentations and changes in state, an interior which is neither fixed nor finished and through which we glimpse a philosophical stance which is a way of living and interacting with the world from the most intimate sphere.”¹

The rooms included in the category “Atelier Rooms” are some of the domestic interiors that are works of art, in which the rooms cannot be understood without the subject as a designer. The personalities that appear in his articles are artists who use their domestic spaces as the first field of artistic experimentation of a way of life. The furnishings take on a poetic dimension and the person develops a relationship with each piece that transcends the subject-object relationship to instead situate them in the same hierarchy.

The room is an everyday work of art which the person completes; it can be as diverse and mutating as the objects that inhabit it, and the binary categorization between intimacy and exposure are in mutual tension and forced to be redefined. The room becomes an exhibition space through publications, where the photograph domesticates objects to exhibit them in the museum, and it exhibits what is used at home and in many featured cases, they produce art for museums and magazines from their most private sphere.

Some of the interiors that Sottsass published include the houses of Emmanuelle and Quasar Khanh, David Hockney, Günther Uecker and Niki de Saint Phalle, and Jean Tinguely, where the works of art determine the way the domestic space is used and moved within.

GIORGIO CASALI: WHITE ROOMS

Giorgio Casali was responsible for the magazine's image for 30 years (1953 to 1983), including multiple covers. Casali constructed the image of a generation, and as Ponti acknowledged, the magazine's success was built upon the use of big images and brief texts.

Casali's attitude is precisely the opposite of Sottsass's. The photograph is not left to chance but is instead a studied setting. The shot takes time and could evolve and change. The setting is meticulously calibrated. The framing constructs the total narrative.

In May 1964, Gio Ponti offered his own design for a house to one of his magazine readers who wanted to build it. He drew the floorplan with yellow lines to show a simple route that leads across the house from one end to the other, and he defined the points from the first sketches from which the visuals would be the longest and will allow to peer through rooms and walls.

Ponti defines the position of the subject in the space, placing them in the entry threshold.

The built house that was finally designed and adapted by Nanda Vigo was published in 1970 with photographs by Giorgio Casali, who captures the coral collaboration that condenses the interior. The yellow lines drawn in the plan by Ponti mark the direction taken by Casali's camera. Casali is in the entrance hall. This room is a corridor only 90 cm wide where the customized artwork produced on commission by Piero Castellani is hung. Castellani's taut white canvas seems to reproduce the 20 x 20 cm ceramic pieces that clad the walls. Just like a knife-thrower, the canvas is crushed against



Figure 2: cover of *Domus* 414 and pages 33,34,35 of *Domus* 482 featuring photographs by Giorgio Casali. Home of the collector Giobatta Meneguzzo in Malo designed by Nanda Vigo and Gio Ponti. Quotation right.



Figure 3: Image of the book *A house is a house is a house : Architectures and Collaborations of Johnston Marklee*. Springer Vienna Architecture, featuring photographs by Livia Corona of the Sale house. Quotation right.

the mirror of the same size that covers the opposite wall. The mirror multiplies the effect while simultaneously breaking the linearity of the hallways.

In the middle of the image, the furry banister of a spiral staircase is placed at the intersection of the views in Ponti's original design. The staircase activates the spatial experience opposite the entrance, leading to circular movement in concentric circles in an open area clad with soft, plush fur.

Casali shot directly facing a mirror in the back of the room, and a reflection of "Teatrino," designed by Lucio Fontana, is captured in the image. It is a tiny theater with a white frame over a white canvas, where the frame is actually the proscenium of his theater and the photographer is the audience.

Casali immortalizes the moment when the people were gathered in the conversation pit, a lively group hidden behind one of the low walls clad with three ceramic tiles and covered on

the inside by the lush white fur that absorbs the noise and conversation. No walls are needed to make it a private, silent place.

On either side of the conversation pit hang two panels designed by Julio Le Parc. They are reflective sheets which fracture, multiply, and distort images. The walls create visual intimacy by interrupting the neatness of the image. People inject vibrations, which activate the white via a stratification of reflections, where the potential for altering the domestic scene lies in the flexibility of its occupancy and the juxtaposed effects that they project onto the surfaces. In this interior, staging seems real and reality seems staged.

PROVISIONAL COROLLARY: LIVIA CORONA

These two ways of registering interiors promoted by *Domus* magazine, Sottsass's, which could be interpreted as the opportunist hunter for the perfect shot, and Casali's, the meticulous observer that added a layer onto the narrative of the architecture and redefine it, seeming to collapse into a contemporary way of seeing, a way of looking that pays more attention to everyday life, the ordinary, the honest, and staged / not-staged domesticity that also redefines the space.

The artistic photographs of Livia Corona, where "fictitious, staged aspects are seamlessly combined with observations of real scenes that happened coincidentally"², is one example of this way of seeing.

Corona recorded the "Sale House" designed by Johnstonmarklee through series of pictures that destabilizes the viewer. The building is the secondary actor, but she also stages specific aspects of the architecture which are interpreted as a series of clues that spark more questions than it tries to answer. "These singular aspects are what enable us to develop an immediate emotional relationship to a picture. We cease being a distanced observer and become part of the picture's reality".³

Neither the way the space is used, nor the clothing, nor the action, nor the objects, nor the actors, nor the colors construct a linear, compact narrative. The photos are ironic, absurd, mysterious.

Corona's photographs, just like Casali's and Sottsass's articles, work as footnoted observations, as notes on the interior more than on generalizable statements, with the intrinsic intention of making the accumulation of footnotes and clues the only way to solve the crime or build a more encompassing discourse on the domestic space.

ENDNOTES

1. Domus n. 437, April 1966, Article by Ettore Sottsass "Mattoni sotto il letto"
2. Ilka & Andreas Ruby (Eds.): *Of People and Houses. Architecture from Styria*. Graz Architecture Yearbook 2008/2009. With photographs by Livia Corona. Language: D/E. 10 pag. Verlag Haus der Architektur Graz, 2009
3. Ibid