

## In-Habit: Occupation and Decoration

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**Abstract:** “A building, for whatever purpose erected, must be built in strict accordance with the requirements of that purpose. Its decoration must harmonize with the structural limitations (which is by no means the same thing as saying that all decoration must be structural), and from this harmony of the general scheme of decoration with the building, and of the details of the decoration with each other, springs the rhythm that distinguishes architecture from construction. Thus all good architecture and good decoration (which it must never be forgotten, is only interior architecture) must be based on rhythm and logic”<sup>1</sup>

Within their book ‘The Decoration of Houses’, Wharton and Codman maintain that through the harmonisation of decoration and building, rooms of internal rhythm and logic can be created. This paper will explore the assumption that interior architecture and decoration are integral to each other and to the production of interior space. The creation of interior space is the result of the harmonisation of structure, container and object. This can result in the production of a place where occupancy can be defined through the realisation of the occupier’s habit, a sometimes intense and compulsive obsession.

### Appliance House

In the latter part of the Twentieth Century, the American designer Ben Nicholson conceived and constructed the Appliance House, an experiment in the search for the ideal model of a mass-produced suburban home. Appliance House was an installation built to elaborate upon the tensions inherent in the modern domestic interior. It was never occupied, and it was not intended to function as a real dwelling, instead it was conceived as an experiment in which the conditions of occupancy could be analysed and then fabricated. In the book ‘Appliance House’ Nicholson suggested,

‘Appliance House is a project which shifts the mildly incredible into something which is difficult to discount’.<sup>2</sup>

The project, which was conceived, built, and demolished between 1986-1990, offers a wry, and humorous critique of some of the central concerns of Modernist design ideologies. The project also provokes reflections upon occupancy and the nature of collecting. The title ‘Appliance House’ was devised in order to contest Le Corbusier’s idea of the ‘House Machine’, the notion of a healthy dwelling that eradicated the ‘dead’ concepts, such as the cellar or the attic, of a house. As a riposte to this idea Appliance House was fabricated from the very machines that could be found within these obsolete spaces. Instead of eradicating the cellar and attic, the repositories for discarded objects and out of date equipment such as old washing machines, boxes of photographs, and children’s toys, Appliance House celebrated them, and was constructed from belongings often located within them. They were incorporated into the fabric of the house in order to build a space for occupancy, for domestic inhabitation.

As well as offering a critique on domesticity and a possible new model for a house, Nicholson developed a narrative for the inhabitant of the space. He invented his very own occupant, whom he called ‘The Kleptomaniac’. This mythical figure inhabited the house, and was responsible for adding to the shelter by compacting ‘found’ discarded objects from the city,

and from other houses, and incorporating them into the walls of the dwelling. The Kleptomaniac did this because;

'By assembling frail and barely recognisable traits of urban existence into firm gestures, the Appliance House is formed into a Sub-Urban Home'.<sup>3</sup>

Whereas Le Corbusier's Modular Man was considered to be the harmonious measure of human scale, based on the mathematics of the human body, and a possible occupier of the 'House Machine', the Kleptomaniac is the disharmonious inhabitant of Appliance House. He is the scavenger of the city, accumulating unwanted objects, and applying them to his shelter. All of these objects are rescued from oblivion, and are then incorporated into the trophy room, the first room of Appliance House. This room is called 'The Kleptomaniac Cell',

Appliance House was a unique experiment used for exploring some of the concerns in the creation and occupation of modern domestic space. In its short life it became both a concretization and also an inversion of some of the central ideologies of Modernist domestic design. It also offered an amusing narrative on the issues of occupancy, and also collecting, by creating a house that has been extensively reformed through the expression of a compulsive and intense habit.

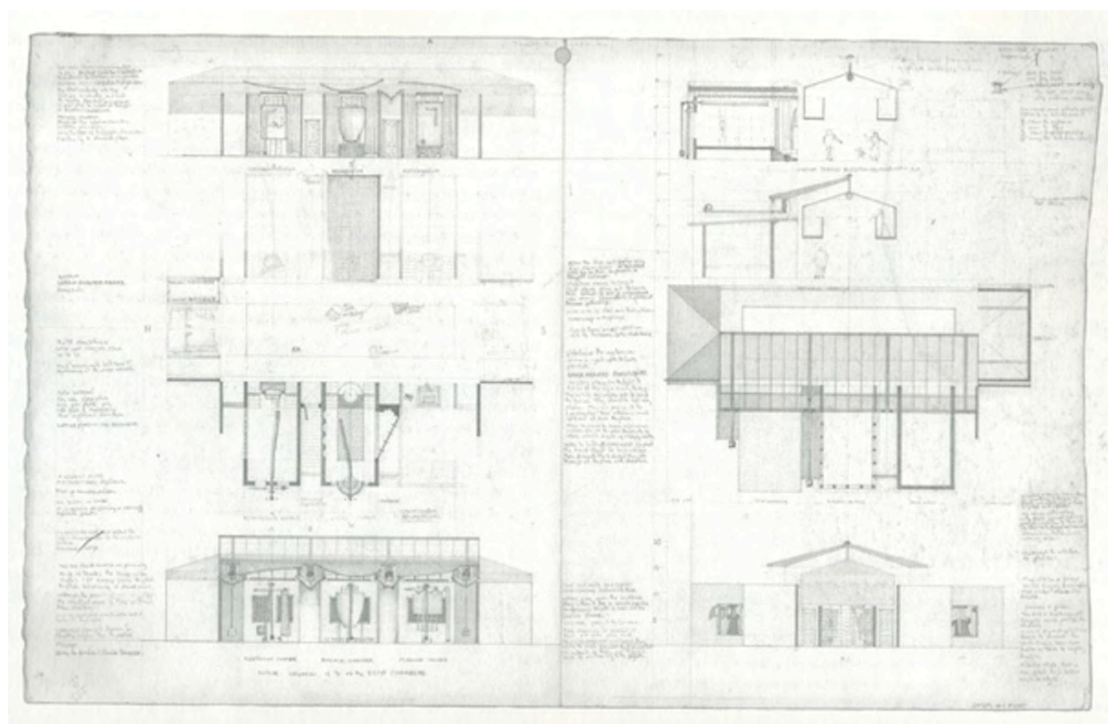


Image 1. The plan of Appliance House.

'Through dreams, the various dwelling places in our lives co-penetrate and retain the treasures of former days'.<sup>4</sup>

The plan of Appliance House was based on the coincidental overlap of two projected images, created during a talk given by Nicholson to his students. Whilst lecturing to the group on the reciprocities between Michelangelo's Laurentian Library and the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel, Nicholson accidentally nudged one projector, overlaying one image on top of the other. Upon noting that the two were in fact startlingly similar, Nicholson used the outline of

the composite plan and ceiling as the layout of Appliance House. The plan for the house consisted of a large hall with six rooms leading from it. Each room measures 20 by 10 feet (approximately 6.5 by 3.5 metres), and is arranged in such a way that the door of each room projects slightly into the long entrance hall. Each room was conceived as an exaggeration of a regular domestic space. For instance, the Kleptomaniac Cell was an embellishment of a study, or a trophy room where the inhabitant might keep their family mementoes or souvenirs. In this room collecting was viewed as a serious habit. The Pyromaniac Chamber was the lounge, the living space arranged around a hearth. Instead of a cosy nook and warming fireplace, it contained an inferno, fit for a pyromaniac to indulge their fantasies. The kitchen was named the 'Bulimia Chamber', the 'Narco-room', the bedroom, and so on. The plan of the house consisted of a collection of rooms that transformed the everyday mundane domesticity of the ordinary house into an exaggerated condition in which modern living could take place, albeit in an exaggerated form.

### **In-fill(subs)-trate**

In Appliance House the traditional distinctions between interior and exterior were eroded. Objects that had been found on the streets of the city were used to define the enclosure of the building. At an urban scale the house appeared to be part of the city yet it was an irregular addition to the streetscape. Nicholson didn't concentrate on the exterior representation of the building, suggesting that the house had no definitive front or back. Instead the main hall connected to a garden and to the street, but it had no meaningful relationship to the landscape or its immediate urban environment. The real relationship between inside and outside space was embodied by the construction of the Kleptomaniac Cell, and by the use of 'found' objects with which to construct the shelter. The Kleptomaniac built the walls of the rooms as a framework in order to accommodate the objects that he collected from his forages in the city. The Kleptomaniac chose objects that had a particular resonance, for instance, a discarded book where a forgotten love letter may have been pushed between its pages, a chair leg removed from a broken piece of furniture, a piece of a broken telephone answering machine, or the leg of a discarded child's doll. By forming the skin of the building with these objects, the threshold between the interior and exterior condition of Appliance House was not simply treated as transparent or solid, but instead was defined by the items appearance and by the associations and memories that they conjure up. This is a situation that Nicholson refers to as the 'half lives' of the objects that demarcate the interior. 'These found objects, shed scales of ourselves, are secreted away in the cell's walls'.<sup>5</sup>

The structure and the envelope of Appliance House consisted of throwaway consumables that were embedded into the framework of the house to become the structural members, skin, and façade. By using these discarded consumables, Nicholson was comparing the obsessions of a surface orientated consumer based society with the fabrication of the cladding with which to cover the room and the building. The panels that are used to cover everyday appliances, such as a washing machine, enclose the chaotic mechanisms of the instrument. It is a skin used to hide the interior, whilst at the same time the surface conveys an outward appearance that is often designed to seduce the consumer. In Appliance House the envelope of the building is configured as a skin that, like a household device, reflects a perpetually youthful look and an eternally flawless complexion back to its occupant. Ironically this skin doesn't age well and is prone to being dented through mishandling, the enamel can be chipped and the plastic can be scuffed or melted through use. Nicholson used the metaphor of appliances to nurture what he called 'homeliness'. The pervasiveness of

mechanical objects is that they facilitate the condition of everyday life and encourage the production of a home space. The technology of Appliance House is not necessarily about the structure or a particular use of the machines, instead it is about the message or identity that these objects convey through their re-use.



Image 2. Collage of the cupboard

Ironically Nicholson reconfigured images from the mass media and in particular pictures of appliances to generate the working drawings of Appliance house. The raw materials of the concept and construction drawings of the house started off as images in a brochure. Nicholson appropriates images from a 'Sears' catalogue, and other brochures and magazines, in order to work up elevations and interior drawings. The action of appropriation through collage is essentially a transgressive act. With a sharp knife the collagist occupies a disruptive position by using trash and magazine off-cuts to form beauty. The collagist can reorder objects, decontextualise images, and splice together elements that are not usually intended to be put together. As Nicholson states;

'Pictures are snipped without care for their actual context. Now they are readied for action. Pages are severed from publications *just because*, and all these acts are done to readjust the pictorial world to suit the viewer a little better'.<sup>6</sup>

Collage is used to place fragments against fragments to create a new image that is greater than the sum of its previous parts. Nicholson used the raw material of the sears catalogue in

order to obtain pictures of appliances. He then camouflaged them with other objects and images, therefore obscuring their original intended meaning, and allowing new meaning to emerge. This process obscured the imagery of appliance house allowing the drawings to take on new connotations, ultimately becoming the renderings for the elevations and the working drawings of the house.

### **The Transgressive Space – the Kleptomaniac Cell**

'The room is not only the universe but also the etui of the private person. To live means to leave traces. In the room these are emphasized'.<sup>7</sup>

Appliance House is made up of 6 rooms connected to the main hall. At either end of the hall are doors to the street and garden. Each room is an accentuated state of a normal suburban house. Upon entering the house, the first room on the right is the Kleptomaniac Cell. The plan of the cell resembles Nicholson's earlier research into the Laurentian library and the Sistine chapel. Here the cell is the room where the contents of the Kleptomaniac's forays, the contents of the cellars and attics, can be collated and placed against each other in close proximity.

The cell is 22 feet long, 13 feet high, and 11 feet wide (Approximately 7 x 4.3 x 3.5 metres). At the entrance to the room stands the Telamon cupboard. The cupboard is named after the classical Greek statues that were set into the walls of the temples. The majority of the objects are stored within the walls, however, it is in the depths of the cell that the collection unfolds. At the far end of the cell is the rear window and the pendulum. The window is a frame to look into, not out of, while also acting as the structural support for the pendulum that points back towards the Telamon cupboard. The cupboard is the heart of Appliance house in that it takes on the characteristics of its namesake by acting as a skin covering the complexities of its interior. Nicholson described it as 'a liberated kitchen appliance, it has finally come to terms with the mechanisms enclosed by the skin tight panels that surround and enclose it'.<sup>8</sup>

The cupboard consists of forty small boxes, each of which contains a sliding door that is a counterbalance. Rather than opening in a traditional sense the front panel slides up and becomes the cover for the next box. The Kleptomaniac secretes his collection in this cupboard, but because of the complexities of the doors he can only see half of its 40 objects at any one time. Nicholson describes the Telamon Cupboard as 'an orphanage for consumer detritus'.<sup>9</sup>

The cupboard becomes a tribute to the items of discarded everyday objects that are overlooked but yet have an innate beauty to the Kleptomaniac. Throwaway items such as a bread tag, a piece of an answering machine, the output of a vast and dull manufacturing industry are worthy, Nicholson suggests, of closer scrutiny, and for him hold the same allure as Polynesian and African artefacts had for the Cubists. The structure of the cupboard is such that one day it will collapse from the sheer weight of the objects and pieces contained within it. The structure is entwined with the non-structural elements, contributing to an elegant stasis that shifts and changes as new things are added or taken away. If the Telamon cupboard is considered as a place to store things, it is quite conventional. As with a typical cupboard, when the doors are closed, there is no indication as to what is behind them. The cupboard acts as a conventional cabinet in that it restores its outward appearance each time the doors are shut, giving no evidence of the fullness or bareness of its inner realm.

In its relatively short life, Appliance House suggested possible ways of occupying space through using everyday objects to create a shelter. Perhaps more importantly Appliance House explored aesthetics and the appearance of domestic space, suggesting an unusual method of constructing a home and at the same time projecting the taste or style of the owner. In this case the home was made from a collection of throwaway ephemera and consumerist objects. Therefore the house was quite literally a reflection of the taste of the owner (even though we may view his collection as rubbish). The house also offered a unique method of understanding the boundaries of an enclosure, the manner in which technology can be used to make a house, and a unique way of creating drawings and plans for its creation. By using collage Nicholson imbued a set of dry working drawings, with all kinds of complex meanings. In Appliance House occupancy is defined through the habit of collecting. The compacting and secretion of objects into its walls has formed the enclosure, yet the objects narrate a variety of stories, each one being etched with its previous use. Perhaps most importantly the house offers a rich and multifaceted set of ideas regarding the complexities of a house, its memories, recollections, and histories, perhaps ensuring it was a 'lived in' machine.

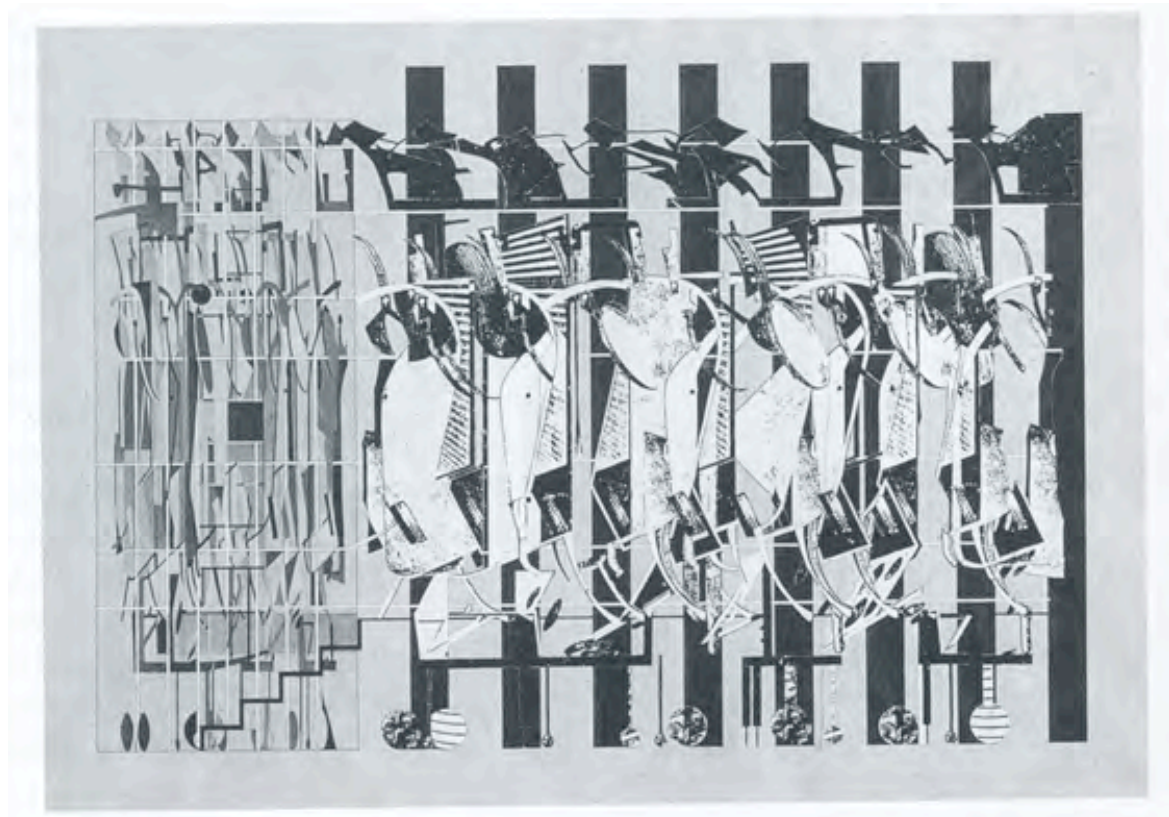


Image 3. Elevation of the Appliance House



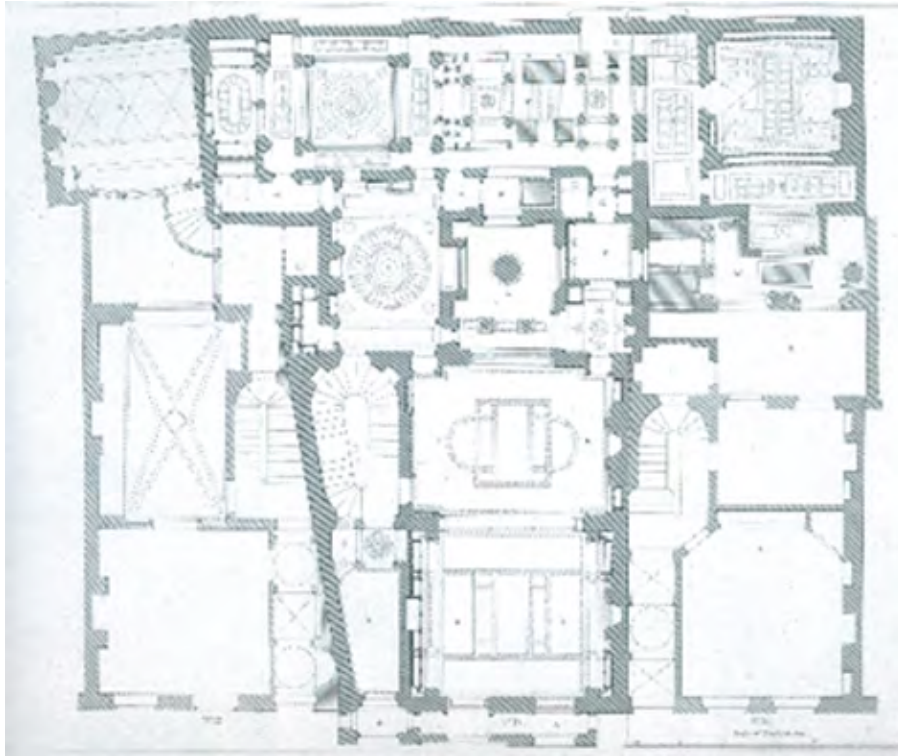


Image 4 Plan of Soane House

In the early Nineteenth century, Sir John Soane remodelled numbers 12,13, and 14 Lincoln's Inn Fields to become his family home. The buildings are now open to the public.

Like Appliance House, The Soane House acted as a receptacle for the life, memories, objects and rituals of its occupants. From 1811 onwards the collection in the house started to develop and grow. Traditional collectables such as prints and paintings were accumulated and placed alongside objects as unconventional as death masks, casts, and even a tomb, the sarcophagus of King Seti of Egypt. Everywhere in Soane House is encrusted with objects collected from his travels. Set amongst this vast collection of objects and set into the ceilings are a series of plain, convex, and concave mirrors. The mirrors mystify the visitor, reflecting walls that do not exist and projecting confusing views through the space. Mirrored inserts lie behind cabinets, above bookshelves, and are set into walls in order to create what seems like an infinite set of rooms, beyond the existing rooms in the compact house.

Deeper inside the house the spacious reception rooms open into the more intimate and congested gallery spaces. There is the study room for the students Soane apprenticed into his office. In this cramped space the eye has difficulty settling on one thing. Everywhere there is an immense amount of visual stimuli. The architectural casts, bits of cornice or a capital from a column, are gathered on different walls. There are busts and statues placed high, low, and out of reach. The sheer number and density of the collection surprises and at the same time disturbs the visitor. The obsessive nature of the collector is personified in the density of the clustered objects. The collection of architectural fragments and casts that Soane collected, many of which were for his students to study, were souvenirs from his travels. Many of the casts and souvenirs are symbols of another place and time, a fragment taken from elsewhere (the word souvenir when translated into French means 'to remember').

In 'The Poetics of Space' Gaston Bachelard elaborates on the home as a space for a collection;

"(it is) Through dreams, that the various dwelling places in our lives co-operate and retain the treasures of former days".<sup>10</sup>

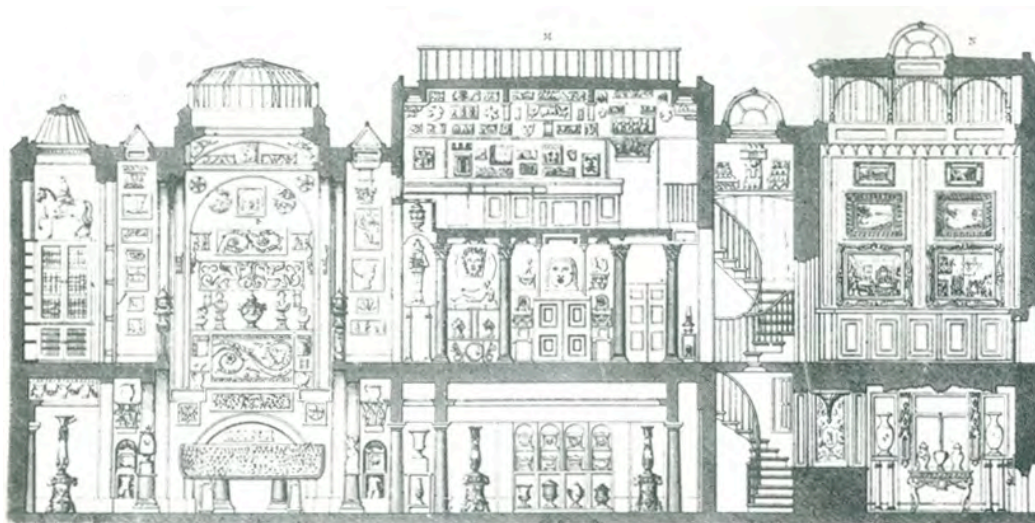


Image 5. Section through the house.

### Disconnection and Reconnection

In these spaces Soane recreates the dreams and memories of his travels and former days by obsessively collecting and overtly displaying his souvenirs. Within the house, the observer needs to gain a foothold in order to take possession of the space and to avoid accentuating the feeling of alienation. Metaphorical 'hinges' are deployed in the form of the mirrors acting as invitations to allow the visitor to 'be' in the space. Initially the mirrors disorientate but in their reflection the observer is allowed to not only to act as a 'ghost' in the house but also to take possession of the home. For a fleeting second, as a visitor pass a mirror or catches sight of a reflection, they too are a part of Soane House. They are projected into the room. As Walter Benjamin once said, "to live is to leave traces."<sup>11</sup>

On the first visit to Soane House the visitor is overwhelmed and disorientated. This is heightened by the mirrors and by the overwhelming barrage of objects, paintings, reflections and light in the home. The visitor can struggle to understand the layout of the interior of the house. Being lost or placed within unfamiliar surroundings leads to what Freud has termed as 'the uncanny' an unease or spatial disquiet. Freud's definition of the uncanny revels in its non-specificity,

"The subject of the uncanny is undoubtedly related to what is frightening – to what arouses dread and horror; equally certain too is the word is not used in a clearly definable sense so that it tends to coincide with what excites fear in general."<sup>12</sup>

One source of spatial disquiet in the house, and perhaps a central focus for the location of the uncanny, may be established in one particular place, the basement. It is within this space lies the sarcophagus of Seti 1. Excavated from the Necropolis in Egypt in 1817, the large stone tomb was installed in the cellar in 1824. The following year Soane held three separate evening receptions for viewing the sarcophagus and in honour of the widow of the archaeologist who died in strange circumstances after the excavation. On those three nights Soane lit the house with lanterns and invited friends and relatives to welcome the new object



he had bought. A friend of Soane's, Benjamin Haydon recorded his visit as, "the greatest fun imaginable." He took great pleasure in watching people come up from the basement and enter the library; "...after wandering about below, amidst tombs and capitals and shafts and nose-less heads, with a sort of expression of delighted relief at finding themselves among the living with coffee and cake."<sup>13</sup>

This amusing description of the evening suggests Soane had a highly developed sense of the macabre. It also suggests that he was fully aware of the significance of placing the sarcophagus into the basement of the house. In 'The Necessity of Artifice', Joseph Rykwert describes the burying of the dead in the family home as common practice in many different religions and social groupings. He also points out where they were usually placed; "the cellar is a dark, hidden, irrational part of the house: many people buried their dead under the floor or incorporated their bones into the substructure of their houses."<sup>14</sup> The heavy weight of the stone sarcophagus ensured that its resting place should structurally be able to cope with its load, at the same time the basement provided the most significant place to intensify its meaning within the house. In horror films, the cellar of a house is often portrayed as a sinister space. Jung describes one source of fear or unease prevalent in the home as always manifesting itself in the basement,

"(In this space) the conscious acts like a man who, hearing a suspicious noise in the cellar, hurries to the attic and finding no burglars there decides consequently that the noise was pure imagination, in reality this prudent man did not dare venture into the cellar."<sup>15</sup>

At the back of Soane House the close connection to the basement and intrinsically, what is contained within it, is always apparent. In the picture room the walls peel away to open up to a view into the basement. The ground floor of the house is punctured by voids opening to the basement. In places the floor is studded with glass bricks allowing opaque views to the cellar and also light to emanate from above. The house and the objects within the basement are always intrinsically connected.

The image conjured up earlier by Haydon's description of the guest's return to the library after visiting the sarcophagus is one of mild fear. As the author suggests there is a sense of relief to be back amongst the living. Perhaps the sarcophagus reminded the guests, in the eerie lamplight, of their own unavoidable demise. One thing is certain the closed casket and the cellar combined together provoked a feeling of the uncanny, a nervousness or unease when faced with the tomb. On the private evenings of the inauguration Haydon describes being able to lift the heavy stone lid of the sarcophagus only a few inches and not being able to see anything inside. When the tomb is closed the viewer can only imagine what is inside. Bachelard suggests that the casket is; "an object that may be opened, but when closed it is returned to the general community of objects; it takes its place in exterior space."<sup>16</sup>

This paper has discussed two case studies, Appliance House by Ben Nicholson and the Sir John Soane House Museum. Both of these particular houses contain collections that could be described as being obtained through intensive or compulsive habits. This paper has examined the relationship between collecting and occupation. It has explored the inhabitation of spaces that contain special collections. It has also considered the unique relationship between collection, container, and what can only be described as an intense or obsessive collector's *habit*. The occupation of these properties is defined through collecting objects and

fragments, some of which have particular associations and acute memories, and many of which are often left over from their previous function. These associated meanings can influence their redeployment within a house. Within the Appliance House and the Soane House, the distinction between decoration and container is blurred and the relationship between ornament and structure is convoluted to the point where both have become as one.

### Endnotes

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2. Nicholson, B. (1990) *Appliance House*. M.I.T. Press. p38
3. Ibid p12.
4. Bachelard, G. (1958) *The Poetics of Space*. Beacon Press. p83
5. Nicholson, B. (1990) *Appliance House*. M.I.T. Press. p38
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16. Bachelard, G. (1958) *The Poetics of Space*. Beacon Press. p84

Images 1-3. Plans, Collage of the cupboard and elevations of Appliance House.

Images kindly provided by Ben Nicholson.

Images 4-5. Plan and section of Soane House.

Images supplied courtesy of the Trustees of Sir John Soane's Museum, Lincoln Inn Fields, London.