May 1983

HOUSE & GARDEN

THE MAGAZINE OF
CREATIVE LIVING
Volume 155, Number 5

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House & Garden (ISSN 0018-6406) is published monthly by The Condé Nast Publications, Inc., 390 Madison Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017. Robert J. Lagrange, President; Eric C. Anderson, Treasurer; Pamela van Zandt, Secretary. Second-class postage paid at Los Angeles, CA and at additional mailing offices. Subscriptions, in U.S. possessions, $36 for one year; $65 for two years; in Canada, $40 for one year; $78 for two years. Elsewhere, $48 for one year, payable in advance single copies: U.S. $3. Canada $4.50. For subscription address changes, write to House & Garden, Box 5202, Boulder, CO 80302. Eight weeks are required for change of address. Please give both new address and old as printed on label. First copy of a new subscription will be mailed within eight weeks after receipt of order. Authorized as second-class mail by the Post Office Department, Ottawa, and for payment of postage in cash. For further information about anything appearing in this issue, please write to House & Garden Reader Information, Conde Nast Building, 390 Madison Ave., New York, NY 10017. Manuscripts, drawings, and other material submitted must be accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope. However, House & Garden cannot be responsible for unsolicited material. Send address changes to House & Garden, Box 5202, Boulder, CO 80302. Copyright © 1983 by The Condé Nast Publications Inc. All rights reserved. Printed in U.S.A.

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AN ARTIST'S DARIKREAM HOUSE
If one takes architecture as the expression of an individual life, one starts at the center rather than at the face, asking what space is created rather than what plot is filled. Places thoroughly lived in become internalized in a series of adjustments till they represent a person to himself, a process the critic can try to follow in reverse, deducing the life from the quarters.

Robert Harbison, *Eccentric Spaces*

David Ireland’s house sits, or squats, on an unremarkable street corner in a somewhat rundown, somewhat bohemian section of San Francisco’s Mission District. An anonymous “builder’s special” dating from 1886, it echoes only faintly the exuberant, polychromed Victorian architecture that proliferates throughout the city. Painted a uniform battleship gray, and from time to time splashed with the further protective coloration of graffiti, it is easily overlooked. Once you become aware of it, however, it gives the impression of deliberately trying to escape notice—a sedate, vaguely sinister presence.

Inside, however, it reveals itself as an “eccentric space” of considerable authority in a part of the country that has plenty of them, including the Hearst Castle and that bizarre Versailles, the Winchester “mystery house” in San Jose. But the mad grandeur of those establishments is here condensed to a snug set of barely a half-dozen small, sparsely furnished rooms. (Part of the ground floor is a studio rented out by Ireland and is separate from his own interior.) Nevertheless, the evidence of a firm hand in dealing with vagaries of space and atmosphere invites comparison with (Text continued on page 104).
This page: The exterior of Ireland's house in San Francisco. Opposite: On a campaign chest in the dining room, a two-volume study of tropical district salads is Ireland's cover as a today guide to Africa. Above is a photograph of his mother's family, whose features are matched in portraiture and mood of the house.
the best surreal architecture California has to offer.

Ireland is a conceptual artist and his house is a work of art that can be lived in—must be, in fact, to be experienced whole. It is a combination often attempted but seldom realized. Surely, day-to-day life in Schwitter's "Merzbau" in Hanover must have been trying, marvelous as the interior looks from surviving photographs. Perhaps the most successful attempt is the town house that Sir John Soane built for himself in London between 1812 and 1814 (see page 158). Like Ireland's it presents to the world an ordinary façade much like that of its neighbors that is belied by the unorthodox unfolding of complex spaces once one is inside. And something of Soane's wry, brooding wit is present in the San Francisco house.

Ireland, born in Washington state in 1930, has had a footloose career that includes extensive travels in places like the Fiji Islands, New Guinea, Malaysia, and Afghanistan; in the late '60s he organized a dozen safaris in Kenya and Tanzania. Returning to San Francisco after a visit to New York in 1975, he saw and promptly acquired the small house on Capp Street from its previous owner, an accordion manufacturer who had lived and worked there from 1930 to 1975. Ireland soon realized that this would be no ordinary restoration job—"consolidation" is the word he prefers to use. "Slowly I progressed, as an artist, and I reached a philosophical point where I realized that the lively presence I was looking for in my paintings was here on the walls, as I stripped away and cleaned off the surfaces." Instead of refinishing the walls and floors, he (Text continued on page 108)
Right: David Ireland. Above: the guest bedroom, with Mexican bedspread. Victorian bed surmounted by a pair of greater kudu horns. To the left, another chair from the house’s ancien régime (chairs are for Ireland “symbols of authority”). This one holds two week’s worth of newspapers commemorating the span of an exhibition of Ireland’s art. Below: Door to bathroom.

Above left: Ireland’s study. Wire construction above desk is by Susan Marie Johnson. Above: A corner of the downstairs vestibule. Below left: On a stool, a jar of rubber bands removed from the daily newspaper after it was delivered and saved by the previous owner; a tape recording of the sound of the rubber bands being removed from newspapers accompanies it. Below: Ireland’s bedroom; a cement picture by him hangs over the bed.
left them as they were after cleaning—
pockmarked and stained the indefinite mellow colors of age—merely sealing
them with a transparent polyurethane coating.

Decorating was thus mostly a ques-
tion of hard work, since the internal surfaces were literally objects trouvés. Fitting out the place for habitation while retaining its somewhat comical austerity was a more delicate task. There are a few imposing pieces of furni-
ture—a Victorian bed whose head-
board echoes the curves of a pair of greater kudu horns fastened to the wall above it; a long, narrow refectory table (actually a carpenter's bench) in the dining room; and two overscaled rattan armchairs made in Hong Kong to Ireland's specifications. Despite their suggestion of some Maughamesque hotel in Malaysia, they seem destined to sit facing each other on the bare, polished floor of the sitting room, beside a strangely beautiful whodunit "sculpture" made of brooms in various stages of exhaustion, which were left behind by the previous owner.

One enters the house through a ves-
tibule like a large closet from which an unassuming staircase ascends to the main living quarters. On the ground floor, behind the vestibule, is the din-
ing room, shuttered—since it faces di-
rectly onto the sidewalk—and therefore dark: a room seemingly kept 
for special occasions. In addition to the table and three campaign chests, the room is furnished with weathered cap-
tain's (Text continued on page 192)
(Continued from page 190) In this way I can do a lot of work. I can escape without feeling absolutely ghastly. And I can break things down. It's a way of working that reduces anxiety.

She has the greatest admiration for The Collectors. "In the first place, they don't think it's in bad taste to have a collection in depth. I think many English people have one picture by someone—maybe even Ghirlandaio—whom they consider to be very much in good taste... and that picture has to go with their faded chintz sofa, and their dogs. Those things have a place in their life that can be regulated. But I don't believe that art can be regulated. I think specifically that new art can't be regulated into taste. You have to give it free rein if you are going to become committed to it any way, and that is what The Collectors do."

The Collectors are perhaps somewhat in awe of their dining room now that it has been transformed into a Work of Art. Although it was finished months ago, they still take their meals in the large and handsome kitchen.

"When they entertain," the artists reflect wistfully, "they bring their friends to see the collection. They look at the Japanese. Some furniture has been set down with an "on approval" look—nothing definite. Jennifer Beckett has a more casual approach. "I always hoping that they would come there ever so often, and invite people sometimes."

Rosamund Bernier is widely known for her wistful, illuminating lectures on art.

GARDEN OF THE MIND

ARTIST'S DARING DREAM HOUSE

(Continued from page 108) chairs from Ireland's safari days, African artifacts and trophies. Among the latter are mounted impala and oryx horns, a giraffe's skull, a Cape Buffalo's skull, and a crocodile head on the rough-hewn "sideboard."

The second floor with its large bay windows seems light and even spacious after the claustrophobic ground floor. Here Ireland's collection of homegrown arte poverta begins to assert its presence. Besides the broom sculpture one notices a pair of cement bookends on the floor of the hallway; a chair missing its seat and part of a leg, with a notebook attached to it by a chain; a window whose cracked glass has been removed and replaced with a copper plate (the glass has been framed in copper and mounted as a freestanding sculpture in the upstairs hall). Close to the rattan thrones is a battered metal one notices a pair of cement bookends on the floor of the hallway; a chair missing its seat and part of a leg, with a notebook attached to it by a chain; a window whose cracked glass has been removed and replaced with a copper plate (the glass has been framed in copper and mounted as a freestanding sculpture in the upstairs hall). Close to the rattan thrones is a battered metal storage unit whose shelves hold jars containing various accumulations related to the restoration of the house—sawdust; dust from the window frames; and, for some reason, a typed poem by Rimbaud. In the adjacent parlor is a wooden stool supporting a mound of wadded-up balls of newspaper taken off the walls, and a bottle of "100-year-old water"—the result of washing a "100-year-old object." Accumulations of the building's previous owner stored in jars include some disgusting-looking dried pears and a cache of rubber bands that once held the daily newspaper when it arrived—a tape-recording of rubber bands being removed from rolled-up newspapers accompanies it, preserving a specific splinter of lived time. At first glance these humble exhibits look very much at home in the house, though they would seem to belong in the cellar. Their oddity announces itself only gradually. Even then it is hard to know exactly what message is being transmitted, beyond a sense of the holiness of the detritus that accompanies us through life. The trivia that Joseph Cornell enthralled in his boxes affects one similarly. What is finally conjured up is a strong sense of the past—the light of a specific Tuesday afternoon in San Francisco 80 years ago.

A certain standard of comfort is maintained despite the austerity—two white-upholstered Italian armchairs in one parlor echo the wicker ones in the adjacent room; placed beside a fireplace, with a tree-stump table between them, they give a fleeting hint of European elegance reinforced by a wooden stand holding newspapers mounted on poles as in older German cafés. But the newspapers—some 20 consecutive issues of the South China Morning Post—are another votive exhibit, commemorating in this case a visit to Hong Kong that Ireland made several years ago. The imposing guest bed with its woven Oaxacan blanket suggests a Gold Rush hotel room, except for the anomaly of the non-indigenous horns on the wall. Just off a small pleasant office, the master bedroom with its unpillowed bed, is almost nastic, except for the presence of a sideboard, which contains various accumulations, including a "reverse day," by Ireland—that is, a Play-Doh rectangle to which scraps of paper have been fastened.

Ireland's house goes a step beyond Post Modernism's tongue-in-cheek acceptance of things as they are by actively celebrating the beauty to be found in grit, decay, and the incomprehensible jetsams that contemporary life leaves behind them. Like Schwitter and Coll and, the poet Guillaume Apollinaire, he draws attention to the poetry of the baggage of daily life. He is always hoping that they would come there ever so often, and invite people sometimes."