

The Cabinet of Dr. Linnaeus -The Reemergence of the *Wunderkammer* as a Counterpoint to Established Museum Architecture

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When reflecting upon one significant marriage of art and architecture, the history of the Great *Wunderkammer* of Europe can be recognized to have contributed greatly to the development of modern Museum Architecture. *Wunderkammern* are spaces of wonder and delight, literally Chambers of Wonder meant to satisfy an insatiable curiosity for the unknown realms of nature. They were at once magic and dangerous, as they represented anomalies and frightful visions that nevertheless were part of the real world. "What are or were Wunderkammern or Kunstammern – chambers of wonder or art chambers? Peculiar collections of eccentric noblemen, some say, others believe they could discover an early version of modern museum culture in them. The truth is always in between." [Fig. 1a, 1b]

In the Renaissance the discovery of hitherto unknown continents and the realization that the earth was a seamless sphere awakened an increasing interest in cataloging the known world. At first existing in the private realms of the elitist courts of Emperors and Kings, *Wunderkammern* were the collected trophies, both natural and anthropological, of royal expeditions sent out to discover and notate the ever increasing flora, fauna and inhabitants of the vast new regions. As myriad storehouses of objects began to be assembled they were initially collected in imperial palaces and monasteries where they were cleaned and mounted, and replicas through paintings and drawings of them were produced, including many in the field, to record them in their living environments.

Through the successive centuries the chambers gradually emerged from the domain of noblemen and the clergy, and with the emergence of cataloging and modern science, great interest was given

by men of learning to visiting and studying the contents of *Wunderkammern*. Through these visits they rapidly were perceived as educational for the masses, the *Wunderkammer* became not only a means for understanding and ordering the known world but also began to have buildings created specifically for them.

In the Nineteenth Century the emergence of the *Wunderkammer* curiosities into the public realm was formalized in the creation of didactic museums of wonders, the great national Natural History Museums. From the Naturhistorisches Museum in Vienna derived from the esteemed Austrian Imperial collections to the British Museum, heir to countless Royal expeditions, to America's own Smithsonian in Washington, D.C. and The American Museum of Natural History in New York (1872-77), private collections were subsumed, sorted, classified, documented, and used for the education of the public. Additionally, these great museums and other smaller regional collections fueled the public's fervor to quench a newly found insatiable curiosity for rare, unusual, wondrous, and bizarre forms of nature. Throughout the Nineteenth and into the early Twentieth Century these great National Museums of Natural History began to vie with art museums such as the Louvre for attention and respect, as the torch was passed on from noblemen and naturalists to scientists to artists. Through the successive eras, as collections formerly housed in *Wunderkammern*, now in large museums, became more revealed, they also lost one element of their exclusivity: their mystery and the eccentricities of their connoisseur owners. This one critical element, the yearning to experience a sense of wonder, reasserts itself in three unique contemporary architectural spaces. These places are modern paradigms for Chambers of Wonder given

over to the mysteries of nature and art.

DR. LINNAEUS AT HAMMERBY - A HISTORICAL CHAMBER OF WONDER

To ground the history of the Wunderkammer, in the Seventeenth Century significant geopolitical changes in Western societies in general were occurring, which led some collections to begin to be exposed to the common man. This was initiated primarily through the work of significant scientists as well as the advent of general education. One great proponent of the Wunderkammer was Carl Linnaeus, who utilized it as a research tool. Known now as the father of the system of natural classification used to order Flora and Fauna, Linnaeus created a house for himself in Hammerby, Sweden near the city of Uppsala, where most of his life in research and academia at the University of Uppsala had been spent. On a rocky knoll above his house Linnaeus constructed a small museum, his personal Wunderkammer, to house his collections of insects, shells, animalia and rare books, and his herbarium. Natural scientists and learned men from all over Europe traveled to the country residence to pay tribute to the cabinet of Dr. Linnaeus and to engage in heated discussions of taxonomy.

Although architecturally the buildings at Hammerby conform to the traditional Swedish residence types of their time, Linnaeus enlivened the interiors with portraits of his ancestors and relics of his lifelong collecting quests. In the museum rooms, wooden built in cabinets displayed preserved specimens of creatures in large corked glass vials classified according to the Linnaean system. Particularly of interest to visitors of the residence were Linnaeus' study and sleeping chamber on the ground floor, where the walls came alive with the sequential patterning of botanical illustrations from ceiling to floor as if in a large book [Fig. 2, 3]. It was this treatment of a plethora of naturalistic subjects utilized architecturally that served to prove Linnaeus' immersion in his scientific passion. Over his bedroom portal was a painting of a whale and its calf joined by an umbilical cord, which first convinced Linnaeus that the whale was indeed to be classified as a mammal and not as a fish. The walls in effect were an illustrated scientific proof, and the enlightenment of the guests a logical end. A special focus was reserved for a portrait of Linnaeus' dear pet, the Capuchin monkey "Grinn", whose companionship brightened Linnaeus' days during the formidable organization

of the living world.

The collections were not only illustrative, and served to prove critical theory, but were also intensely personal, reflecting the wonders of the age through his eyes. This first humble Wunderkammer and the successive visitations of its esteemed guests caused the seeds of a desire to create houses for the Wunderkammern to be planted.

ESTABLISHED MUSEUM ARCHITECTURE - A DENIAL

Through the evolution of museums dedicated to Natural History collections, something of their original awe inspiring nature was lost. The miraculous Wunderkammer, filled with the sense of exhilaration provided by the unfolding of the natural world and its infinite variety and beauty, was desiccated through the scientific process of taxonomy that was emphasized. Literally cut and dried, mounted on the walls in their perfect categories, their wondrous aspects began to be denied. Scientists emerging as harbingers of a distinct world view of clear vision, sought to distance themselves from the suspect aspects of their collections that had been clouded by superstition and mythology. Robert Harbison in his essay "Contracted World: Museums and Catalogues" epitomizes this succinctly: "It is museums, Houses of the Past, which turn all they pick up to history. The act of *museumifying* takes an object out of use and immobilizes it in a secluded atticlike environment among nothing but more objects, another space made up of more pieces." It is perhaps this utter removal from nature and context which is one of the principle difference in the Wunderkammer and established museums of Natural History. In the case of Linnaeus' home there is a distinct integration of the inside and outside, a continuous overflow of the natural world into the rooms. Harbison in his language of combing the worlds *museum* and *mummify*, hints directly at the dried and removed remains. When speaking of museum spectators he speaks of "the immersion in the object that stops time is achieved by treating it as an existence to be lived in rather than something to be stopped in front of or looked at" he goes on to describe this occasion: "...Never entirely certain whether the trance is life-enhancing or draining, museums need to have many objects because people can not tell in advance when this alchemic internalizing will occur. It is clear that he is expounding on a sense of awe, and goes on to say that "these ideas are the

stuff that museums operate on". In the subsequent architectural examples a case will be made that a return to Spaces of Wonder is underway, and has now entered the realm of artists. The soul of the Wunderkammer reappears in the artistic vision of individuals, and can be seen in the following examples today.

A PRIVATE VISION – A GIFT TO THE PUBLIC - GALLERY AS CHAMBER

With the passing of Dominique de Menil a large Wunderkammer has been installed in the Menil Collection Museum in Houston, Texas in a chamber within the labyrinth that is the Surrealist Gallery. It is entitled "Witnesses - A Surrealist Vision". "Witnesses" is a compilation of ethnographic artifacts and tribal art collected by John and Dominique de Menil to show the framework upon which Surrealism was built. All the objects in this Wunderkammer were either owned by or similar to objects used by the Surrealists. Inspired by the spirituality of the last untouched tribes of humanity the Modern Art Movements of the Twentieth Century and their great artists received the torch passed by their scientist predecessors as the vehicle of transcendence for these indigenous cultures and mysterious objects drawn from nature. The "Witnesses" gallery is the recording of this great transmission [Fig. 4].

Architecturally, the "Witnesses" Wunderkammer is situated in the great modernist work of Renzo Piano, the Menil Collection, commissioned by Dominique de Menil to quietly showcase her assembled works [Fig. 5]. Piano's museum architecture itself serves to highlight the art, rather than itself, and its main internal visual component is in the form of its ferroconcrete leaves that filter the crystalline blue Texas light. Composed of a rectilinear expressed steel structure with an infill of cypress planking, surmounted by a treasure box archive, the museum is divided transversely into an East and West Wing and longitudinally into serviced and served areas. Piano himself comments on the space of the Menil, "The result is a place with an incredible atmosphere, inducing a sense of peace and encouraging contemplation. The passage of the overhead light through the leaves gives the interior a unique character." "The Menil Collection succeeds in creating the feeling of a sacred space." In further explaining how this was achieved Piano states, "We have tried to bring immaterial elements such as transparency, lightness and the vibration of light into the architecture. The

intention was to foster a sense of absorption, rather than astonishment. " Into this tranquil armature was inserted the "Witnesses" Chamber.

The most intimate gallery in the Menil Museum, like a small pouch, the "Witnesses" Wunderkammer is circular, low lit, filtered and small scaled, and is located in the shielded Northeast corner of the West Wing [Fig. 6]. With only a single entry and exit provided, screened by a dark velvet drape, the viewer is subjected to great visual density while circumnavigating around a centroidal curatorial display element. This element showcases a leather effigy of a "Wild Man" similar to a "Perchtenfigur" used to drive away winter Alpine climes, a remnant of pagan rites subsumed by Christianity. Although only encompassing four hundred square feet – a residential living room, its full height affords it great opportunities to densify the visual space by vertical "stacking" of objects that rise above the viewer and surround him. On the Southern end of the room angled glass cases surround the viewer in a half-hexagon and create an axial apex of focus, so the viewer may visually perceive many objects without changing positions. In the short procession the path is double loaded reflecting either outward to the vitrines and walls or inward to the rounded central display of tribal objects punctuated by the "Wild Man". As a final gesture a Lilliputian Wunderkammer, in the form of a Louis XV furnishings cabinet of artifacts meant for children, now has its home here in a quiet window niche. It is the crossover between the two worlds of the family, the domestic and the philanthropic.

In 1948 John and Dominique de Menil commissioned Philip Johnson to design a home for their family. Aided by the interior designer Charles James, the De Menils found a comfortable counterpoint to the beauty of light and rigors of line of their Miesian inspired residence with the softness of colorful textiles and earnestness of period furniture pieces [Fig. 7]. Overall their art collection was fully embraced in the environment, such as in the bookshelf of well-read books, which contained a precious small Joseph Cornell box wedged quite naturally on a shelf between two books [Fig. 8]. Two Wunderkammern in miniature occurred in this modernist masterpiece, both situated in locales of surprise to add to their wonder. The first was a cabinet in the sense of built-in furnishings, a reductive room whose sheltered space offered a place where entrance was gained through the eyes and hands

[Fig. 9]. When a guest was offered a beverage at the Menil home, a pivoting door on hidden hinges opened from a paneled wall to reveal a bar where the cognac and cordials were stored in their own Wunderkammer of exquisite small works – a perfect watercolor rendition of a single feather, rare Venetian crystal, a Braque, a small Chagall [Fig. 10]. Every point of the surface was enriched with art, antiquities, and curiosities both in the form of drinks as well as their containers, and counter pointed by small animals and natural relics. The juxtaposition of the liqueurs, their exquisite glasses and decanters, and the assembled small natural wonders produced a momentary vision of delight before the cabinet swung back and was closed again.

The other small chamber of wonders existed in the form of furniture, a hinged cabinet with four legs whose top and drawers opened to reveal its wonders – rare feathers, shells, ethnographic artifacts, miniature art works. This special cabinet existed for the children of the Menil home, the smallest guests for whom the discoveries of the world's wonders were just beginning. These two pieces are the documentation of the significance of the concept of a Chamber of Wonders in both the Menil Museum and the De Menil Residence, and show the circuitous interaction between the public and private aspects of Dominique de Menil's personal vision of wonder.

MUSEUM ARCHITECTURE AS PARADIGM – CRYSTAL WORLDS

An exacting and mysterious modern approach to a Chamber of Wonders has been constructed at *Kristallwelten* (Crystal Worlds) – the Swarovski Museum designed by Austrian architects *propeller z* with artist André Heller, located in Wattens near Innsbruck. *Kristallwelten* is dedicated to revealing the mysteries that crystals have inspired throughout history, in scientists and artists alike.

The entire concept of *Kristallwelten* programmatically is based on a series of Chambers of Wonders strung together like the eponymous crystal beads on a necklace [Fig. 11]. Realizing the theatrical visions of André Heller and based on his performance art, the museum is largely located underground and is accessed by entering through an earth bermed green area with the gestalt of a Gargantuan spouting water, literally into the mouth of the Leviathan.

In the museum, the carefully choreographed path leads the viewer through the various wondrous rooms, beginning at the large volume entry hall bisected by a dramatic thickened wall of structural glazing containing millions of crystals. The sequential chambers are comprised of projection viewing areas, small galleries and rooms with a variety of light and sound experiences culminating in an internal centroid called the "crystal dome". Upon exiting the dome the path then radiates outward through the crystal theater and pass of the crystals upwards to the Second Level, ending in a long gallery exhibition space flanking the opposite side of the Crystal Wall that features changing related exhibitions.

The architects, *propeller z*, have taken the Wunderkammer paradigm and have spatially translated its essence into architectural experiences of height, breadth and volume [Fig. 12]. Architecturally the museum is in reality a large rectilinear box with the diagonally bisecting linear crystal wall forming an organizing device that strengthens the internal divisions of the path. The surfaces of subsidiary walls are intentionally subdued to focus attention through the theatrical lighting on either the great structural crystal wall or are represented by objects and artifacts or broad planes of color and light produced effects. The one-way linearity of the museum poses a special challenge architecturally, although a path loop with places like beads on a necklace required by the programming seamlessly achieves its goal. By taking their patrons on a journey into the "belly of the beast" while revealing delights along the way, André Heller and *propeller z* Architects have allowed their audience to experience the excitement of the unknown of the Wunderkammer.

ARTISTIC PARADIGM -FLORALEGIUM

Today, the art of the Natural History Illustration is no longer purely didactic.

As seen in the work of artist Walton Ford, who uses this form of illustrations in his paintings, the subject may now be twisted and serve to represent subsurface metaphors.

A more modest creation of a Wunderkammer was achieved in 1988 by artists Joanne Brigham and Jeff DeLude in a collaborative work for their son. The *Floralegium Kitchen* was one family's private perceptions of the natural world brought inside, – a seamless transition between nature and art. As a

person more comfortable in the out of doors, Joanne Brigham had sought to reconcile her relationship to nature her entire life. In the kitchen the artists have created a space which harkens back to the cottage of Linnaeus in its internalized nature.

Architecturally, the wood framed bungalow in which the Floralegium Kitchen is located sits on an irregular shaped lot, which occurs at the apex of a horseshoe shaped street. In this old established neighborhood streets are named for flowers, planets of the cosmos, and bounding the perimeter of the site is both nature in the form of a riparian ravine, and repose in a cemetery with serene white angels and the rhythm of wide blocks of stone in green.

Drawn from the pages of great botanical illustrations, the Floralegium blooms upon the walls of the bungalow drawing the observer ever closer to the heart of the house – the kitchen [Fig. 13]. Revealing itself gradually by a wall glimpsed from the high ceiling living room opening to the rear garden, the Floralegium densely activates the wall and causes the guest to visually change scale in accordance with the many patterned drawings, in a simulacrum of Linnaeus' private chambers. The path denoted is clear - whether juxtaposed with expanses of quiet walls or the visual density of a chamber of retablos, it brings a guest to the destination of the Floralegium Kitchen, where water, warmth and sustenance emit a familial idyll.

An apt mnemonic device, the personal space of the kitchen illustrates and reinforces the daily world of the outdoors which children are more directly and instinctively bound to than the world of removal of adults. It is this space that infuses Joanne Brigham's many performance works with their depth of meaning, and its significance, although exclusive to her family's world, will be written in the family's history.

CONCLUSION

The concept of the Wunderkammer has been an architectural inspiration since its inception. It be said that even Italo Calvino's classic stories of miraculous places, "Invisible Cities", is a literary Wunderkammer as well, revealing urban delights and stimulations alike. By looking at Chambers of Wonder, the idea of a collection of rooms combining to create a great house can be illuminated and embraced. Whether in the works of modern architects who

seek to imbue their museums with the amazing, in the Surrealists who with their architect colleagues dared to imagine Modernism through the lens of the miraculous, or in the close-knit sphere of individual homes, the Wunderkammer is a captivating and unique architectural paradigm quietly seeking to restore meaning to discreet spaces.

ILLUSTRATIONS



Fig. 1a – Cabinet of Curiosities - 1706

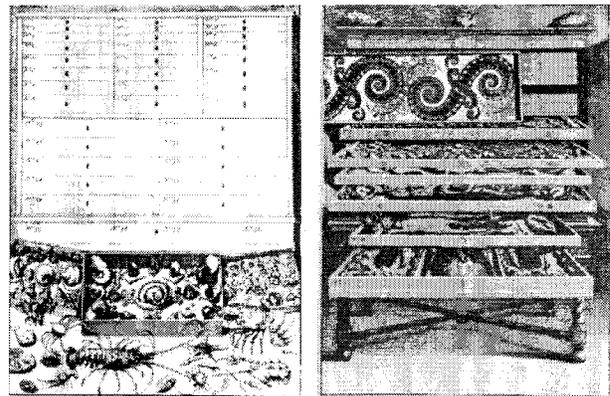


Fig. 1b – Wondertooneel der Nature - 1706

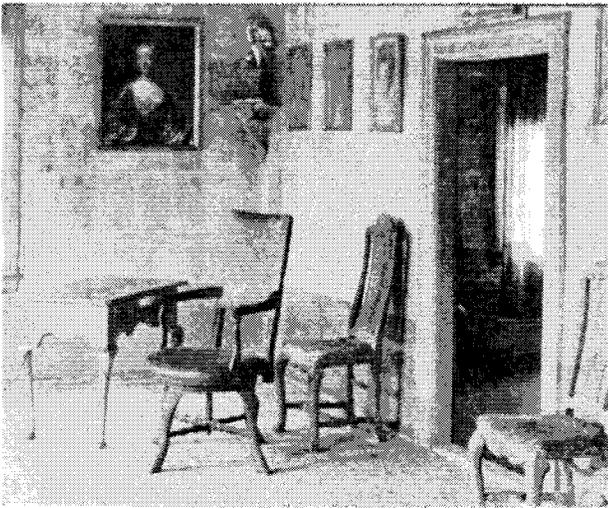


Fig. 2 - Hammerby - Linnaeus' Study



Fig. 4 - Menil Collection - Workshop

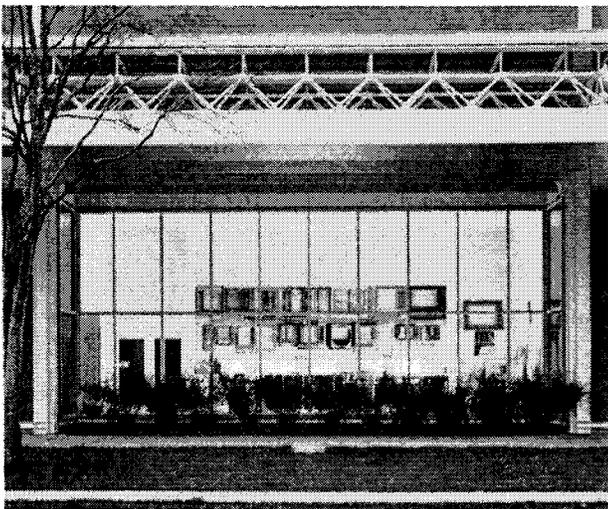
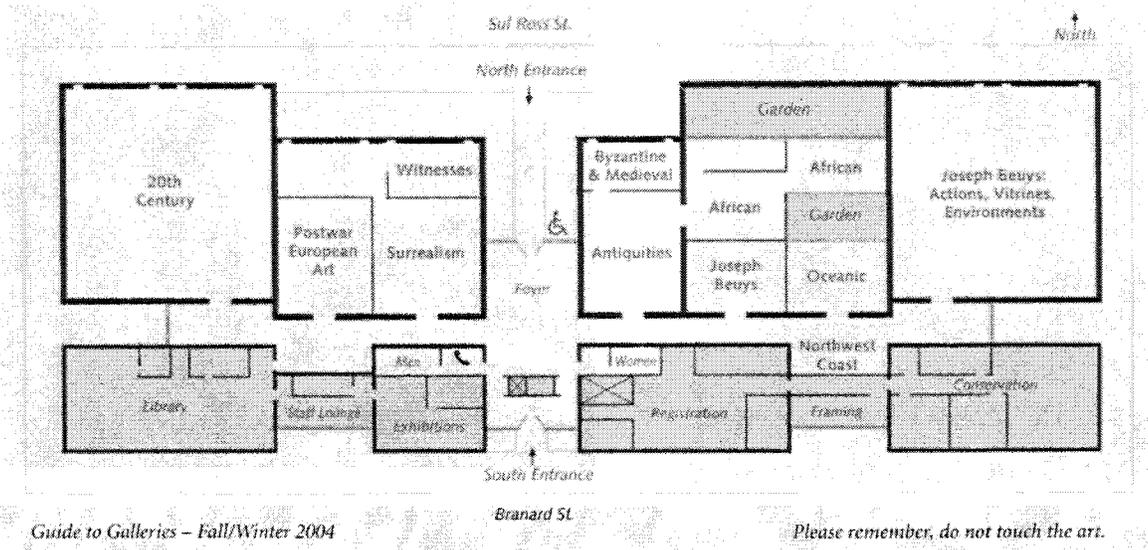


Fig. 3 - Hammerby - Linnaeus' Bedroom



Fig. 6 - Witnesses - brochure



Guide to Galleries – Fall/Winter 2004

Fig. 5 – Menil Collection - Galleries

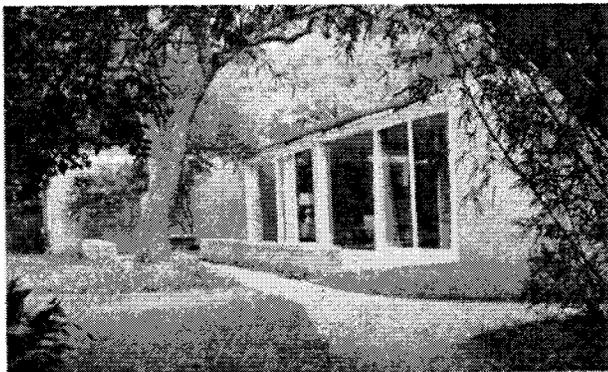


Fig. 7 – Menil House

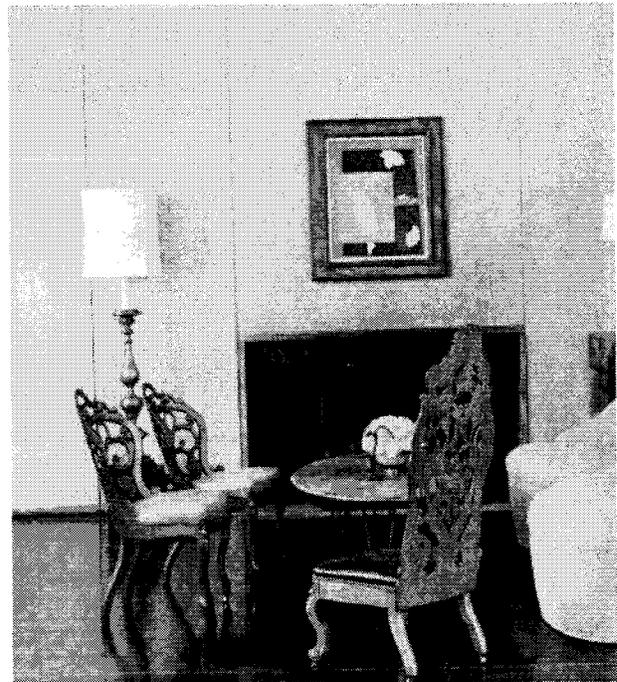


Fig. 9 – Menil House – hidden Liquor Cabinet

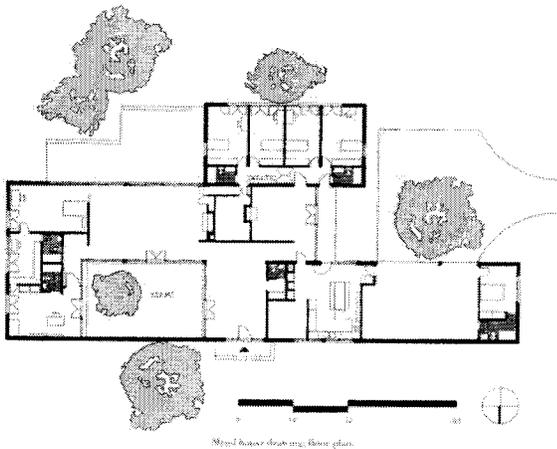


Fig. 8 – Menil House - Plan

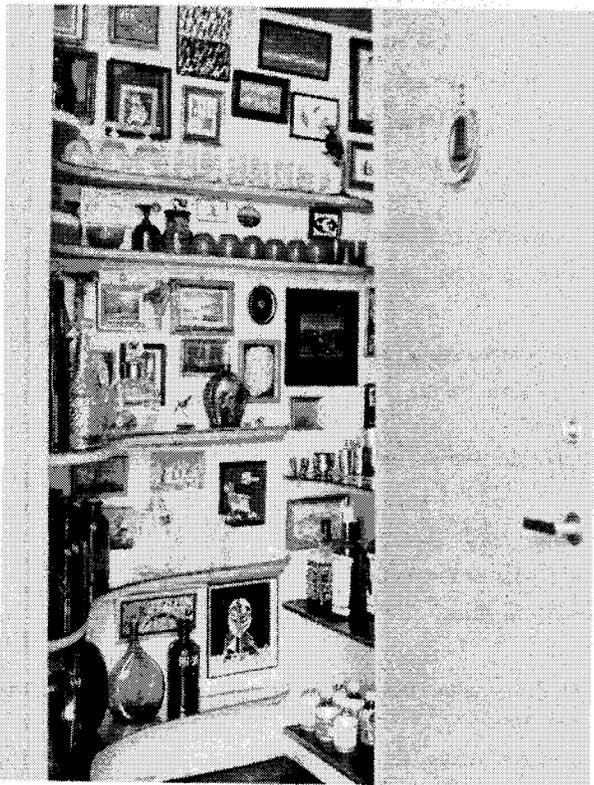


Fig. 10 – Menil House – open Liquor Cabinet

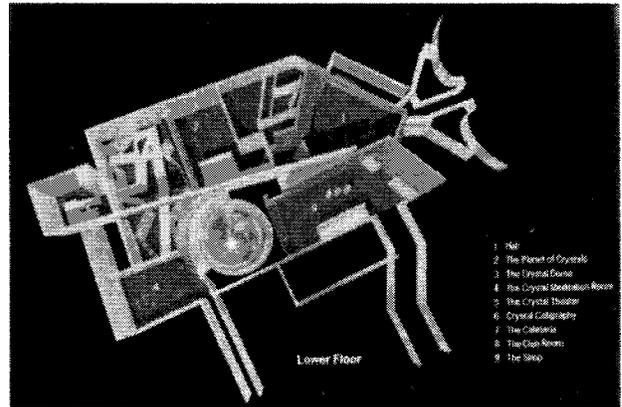


Fig. 12 – Kristallwelten - Plan

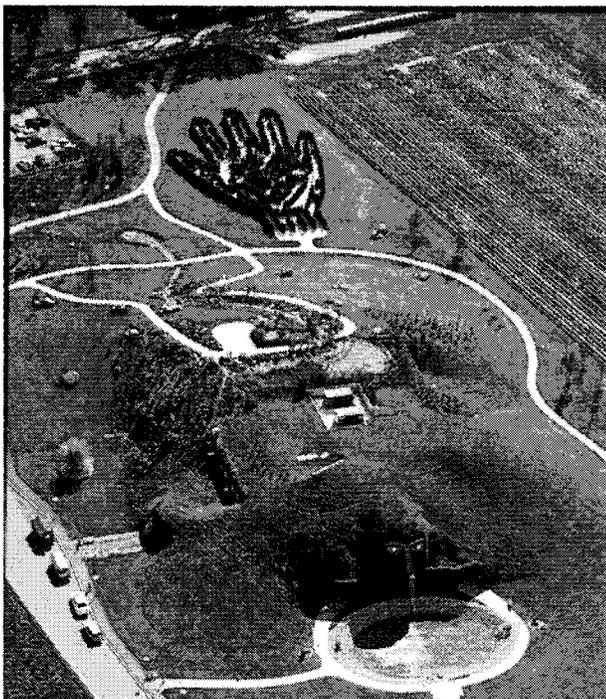


Fig. 11 – Kristallwelten - Aerial



Fig. 13 – Globe Fish - 1731

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