Going public: The modern heritage house on display

Hannah Lewi
Abstract

This paper investigates issues surrounding the conservation, display and interpretation of modern houses of architectural significance. It draws on a large body of research collected by the author through visits to Modern heritage houses in the UK, France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Australia, alongside interviews with heritage curators and conservationists associated with these properties. From this work, three key themes are elucidated: Firstly, the paper examines the status of Modern heritage houses as ‘historical documents’ and the role they play in the ongoing formation of architectural histories of Modernism. Secondly, the research critically interrogates how conservation, interpretation and display strategies have been modified to the particularities of Modern houses, in contrast to older and more ‘traditional’ heritage properties. Thirdly, the protection of many Modern houses has involved controversy over their value, and divided opinion as to their appropriateness for public custodianship. Accordingly, the interpretation of these Modern heritage houses has tended to strike a balance between the display of biographical interest surrounding the client and family, and architectural significance. These interpretation motivations are closely considered in terms of the narratives they are communicating to both the visiting public and the expert audience.

As modern twentieth century architecture ages and recedes into the realms of history, surviving examples have increasingly become accepted as valid additions to heritage inventories and protected sites (Whiteley 1995:220-237).1 In the particular case of modern houses deemed of significance, their ‘embalming’ as house museums for public display offers one kind of lifeline for the future. The very act of preservation may be seen as antithetical to the ideals of modernist architecture; characterised as distinctive in its celebration of newness and ephemerality and its opposition to age and historicity. However the following account will not pursue this now well-trodden path analysing the paradoxes of conserving modernism. And, as other commentators have pointed out, the conservation movement and modernism did develop hand-in-hand, not merely as adversaries but rather more like antagonistic siblings, each with a different yet in some ways complementary response to progress.2 Nor is the particular program of conserving and restoring a modern house easily generalised as antithetical to the ideals of modernism; through their embalming and ongoing care, these houses can maintain some illusion of eternal youth and ‘presentness’ – not necessarily at odds with their original conception.

The public display of modern domestic exemplars also continues some of modernism’s central preoccupations: avant-garde and cubist movements experimented with the creation and staged display of interior modern rooms before and after World War 1; and modern architects often exploited the genre of domestic display when showcasing radically new conceptions of living...
to a public audience – for example the display of designs at the Weissenhof Estate, Stuttgart in 1927, and the inclusion of novel pavilions at international expositions such as Charlotte Perriand’s model modern apartment at the Salon d’Automne in 1929. This custom of displaying experimental technologies for the home, and innovations for new lifestyles, gained further momentum in the mid-century through the likes of Buckminster Fuller’s Dymaxion House, the Smithsons ‘House of the Future’, and many other examples created for commercial technology developers (Lewi & Smith 2008:633-661).

The genre of the house museum as a form of cultural display has, a long pre-modern pedigree stretching back to seventeenth century antecedents of the ‘open house’. Jeremy Aynsley has set out a useful taxonomy of three types of representations of rooms and interiors found in the twentieth century. First, there are ensembles taken from previous locations and reconstructed in museum interiors. These reconstructions place emphasis on the originality of the fabric that is seen as worthy of protection as a museum exhibit. Second, there are interiors that are preserved in their original locations as part of their extant architectural environs. These ‘curated houses’ may be part of a gallery or museum, owned by a heritage body or private foundation. Third, there are interiors that are drawn, filmed or modelled as representations through which to imagine or sell houses, furniture ensembles and so on (Aynsley 2006:9). It is the second category of the ‘curated house’ or house museum that is of interest in this paper. The basic functions of preservation, investigation and communication inherent in any museum can be found in a curated house. In a house museum, writes Magalay Cabral; ‘the document (object/cultural asset) is the actual space/setting (the building), as well as the collection and the person who owned (or lived in) the house.’ (Cabral 2001:41). An understanding of the intimate relations between these categories of setting, collection and owner are critical for the conservation, interpretation and display strategies adopted in house museums. Through a series of case studies of modern houses, the aim here is to tease out some of the connections between conservation, interpretation and display in these houses, alongside an understanding of the transformations enacted when houses pass from being loci of everyday living into sites of public display.3

The two main cases drawn from Australia are the Rose Seidler house in Sydney and Robin Boyd’s Walsh Street house in Melbourne. The Rose Seidler house, designed by Harry Seidler in 1950 for his parents, won the Sulman Medal for architecture in 1952 (figure 4). The building still maintains a significant place in the history of Australian modernism as a relatively early and provocatively European modern house. The property was gifted to the NSW government in 1988, with the Historic Houses Trust of NSW maintaining a charter to manage it as a house museum. A full conservation plan for the building, contents and landscaping was prepared by the Historic Houses Trust in 1989 as part of this transfer to public ownership. Harry Seidler was involved in this process and key early decisions in the conservation and display of the property. The museum is open for regular public viewing, tours and functions. The second Australian case house was designed by Robin Boyd for his family in Melbourne in 1958. This property is under the care of the Robin Boyd Foundation which was formed in 2005 as a not-for-profit group dedicated to the promotion of design awareness, design literacy and design advocacy. The Foundation was constituted in a situation of some urgency when Boyd’s family offered the property for public sale in 2004, with the aim of transferring ownership to a public body that would take responsibility for the conservation and maintenance of the house and much of its contents. It is not envisaged that the Boyd house will ever function as a formal curated museum house but rather will continue to have a different management agenda of semi-public use associated with the promotion of design innovation.4

The Seidler and Boyd houses sit well within a comparable range of international case studies of modern house museums. In terms of the choice of these examples, this study is selective and based partly on opportunities of access. The English sites visited and closely examined to date include: 2 Willow Road in Hampstead London, designed by Erno Goldfinger (1939) (figure 6); the Homewood, designed by Patrick Gwynne in Surrey (1938)5 (figure 1); and the Red house, Bexleyheath, designed by Phillip Webb and William Morris (1853 – just squeaking in as modern). All these properties are managed by the National Trust UK. Kettle’s Yard, the former home of Jim Ede in Cambridge and now managed by the University of Cambridge as a
house and art museum, comprises the final English example (figure 5). Other European cases studied include the Sonneveld house Rotterdam, designed by the architects Brinkman and Van der Vlugt in 1933 (figure 3), restored under the auspices of the Stichting Volkskracht Historische Monumentum, and now managed by the Netherlands Architecture Institute in Rotterdam; and the Braem House Antwerp, designed by Renaat Braem in 1958 (figure 2), now managed by the Flemish Government Heritage Department. Interviews were conducted with curators, managers and conservationists of these properties.

What unites these houses is that they were designed by the architects or designers themselves as their family residence and sometimes office, except for the Sonneveld house, which was commissioned by the industrialist client who also commissioned the famous Van Nelle Factory by the same architects in Rotterdam. Because of their basic similarities, their comparisons and subtle contradictions can be fruitfully drawn out. These comparisons centre on the aforementioned close relations between the buildings and settings, the collections and owners that have been critical for the implementation of conservation, interpretation, display and management strategies adopted in the house museums. My analysis places more emphasis on the strategies of interpretation and management, and less on the details of their material conservation, which has been the focus of a number of other accounts.6 However, no one aspect can be examined in isolation, and the techniques and decisions surrounding material conservation are in many ways inseparable from those of interpretation and display management.7 To order the following analysis, the themes of ‘significance’, ‘completeness’ and ‘duration’ are now outlined, followed by some concluding thoughts on the status of the houses as a particular form of public display and historical documentation.

Balancing significance

The attribution of significance or value typically establishes a guiding program for the display and interpretation of properties. In the case of most modern houses, significance typically falls across on the one hand social and biographical value, and on the other architectural and design significance. Some of the case study houses examined were intended from their inception as semi-public demonstrations of how life could be lived anew within an innovative modern environment, while also functioning as private homes. Yet although these attributions of architectural and social significance are inevitably intertwined, they do instigate different and at times arguably conflicting curatorial strategies. Decisions around what emphasis to place on aspects of significance obviously depends in part on the pre-established architectural status of the property. For instance houses like Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye, or Gerrit Rietveld’s Schroder house are heavily invested in the canonical narrative of modern international architecture and have thereby called for less augmentation to evoke social significance and inhabitation in favour of architectural and design significance (Overy 2007:77). As a consequence these types of properties tend to project the somewhat stark ambiance of a ‘young monument’ (Overy 2007:77).

The caricature of the modern house as an unapproachable – even inhuman experiment – indeed presents a dilemma for curators and managing heritage bodies. For example, curators from the National Trust UK assert that the general public finds it ‘incredibly difficult to access architecture so needs other ways of understanding the property.’8 The austerity of neo-classical architecture and the abstraction of modernism are
together seen by the National Trust as occupying the pinnacle of such feelings of alienation: ‘People respond more easily to painted interiors with light filtering through and its romantic associations’. However heritage bodies and curators appear keen to temper such public perceptions, and accordingly all the case study houses examined strive for some balance between the evocation of social or everyday interest and architectural value.

Striking this balance to satisfy a range of visitors, all within the limits of time, space and resources for interpretation, issues challenges to curatorial agendas for modern house museums. The architectural specialist may prefer to see a modern house as a study in spatial form or design connoisseurship akin to a monochromatic photograph. However it is assumed that the general public simply would not visit at all without some other evocation of social interest. Despite the rhetoric of balance presented by organisations like the National Trust UK, these potential conflicts in visitor expectations of interpretation may ultimately be irreconcilable. As one conservation architect interviewed on this topic stated:

Well I am a member of the National Trust, and I go around to their country houses. And always find the family story line is massively distracting. Before you get into the dining room – you are being told that that person is the seventeenth cousin of the Fourth Earl of somewhere. I don’t care who it is. What I want to know is what are the proportions of this room, and what relationship does this bear to the grand tour, and what was it before … The default position in the Trust’s presentation is “so and so begat so and so”. You know it has to be done. But I wonder with the modern stuff if there is not more of an opportunity to offer some sort of alternative narrative as well.10

In the modern house museums investigated in this research, specialist design knowledge has been somewhat subdued in interpretation and displays; eclipsed not by the traditional themes of grand histories, but more through the slightly voyeuristic communication of the former domestic life of the owners and their place in society. This social interest is often justified by and provided through an interest in the life of the architects who designed and occupied the houses – their biographies become a hook for displays that can augment the architectural experience and conjure a sense of ‘personality’ that shapes how the houses are received.11 In some of the properties examined, conventional information boards about the life and importance of the architect-owners are placed in rooms around the houses. Willow Road has such a room with changing displays, and also a film that is viewed on arrival in the converted garage that strongly conveys the architect’s voice. Other houses show architectural interest, less through formal didactic signboards and more through the showing of the architect’s personal office – as in Renaat Braem’s home-office. While the conservation architect for the Homewood has remarked that the removal of Gwynne’s office, and restoration to its original function as a bedroom, was executed according to Gwynne’s own strong wishes but was ultimately a mistake as it lost a natural opportunity to expose his architectural archive to visitors.12 The Rose Seidler house offers a more incidental display of architectural drawings for visitors to look through.
What does appear fairly universal in the range of curatorial strategies adopted is the opinion that conventional signage, and visitor-management strategies like guard ropes, are seen as less appropriate and more intrusive in the intimate setting of a modern house than in other types of heritage sites. To simulate an ‘inhabited’ home, other genres of information communication are called into play. These include scholarly guidebooks with biographical and social narratives (which the National Trust UK are particularly adept at producing (The National Trust 1996; 2003; 2004), and orchestrated visitor tours. For example, the tour on offer at the Red house when I visited was far more about William Morris’s personal life at Bexleyheath than about his contribution to British design. And the tour at the Braem house gave many intimate insights into the architect-owner by the current curator who now lives in the house. Increasingly the short film is introduced as a primer to a visit, thus lessening the burden of interpretation in the rest of the house to follow. Very successful examples can be seen at Willow Road, the Sonneveld and Seidler houses.13

Returning to the issue of striking a balance between communicating social and architectural significance, the Rose Seidler house attempts such a balance through attention to the architectural and design value of the site, yet also through the inclusion of furnishings and objects that evoke something of the former everyday life of the house. There are, for example, a few slightly incongruous artefacts displayed in the house like the Viennese silverware set that Harry Seidler’s mother Rose preferred to use (when her son was not around). These are seen as important in communicating, through their display, the European ties of the Seidler family and the agenda of ‘total modern design’ that their son sought to impose on family life (Richards 1994). The house is however primarily a museum of architectural interest rather than a home that documents typical family life in the 1960s. Some researchers have perceived this ‘subversion’ of social everyday value in favour of architectural status as a shortcoming in the interpretation program of the Rose Seidler house.14 The Boyd House also aspires to invest the house with architectural and design significance befitting Robin Boyd’s place in the history of Victorian and Australian modernism. However, in part due to the more relaxed informality of the original design, there is a strong anti-monumental agenda that drives the desire to exclude conventional museum-like signage or interpretation in situ, and to provide very few formal guided tours. In contrast to the other houses, an interesting alternative mode of ‘incidental interpretation’ has been articulated as the long-term aim for the Boyd house.

Completeness and Empathy

Aside from formal interpretation on aspects of significance, another curatorial dimension that reveals the intimate connections between contents, buildings and owner/designers is how
'complete' the houses are presented in respect to their contents. Through everyday artefacts, furnishings, interior finishes, artworks and so on, parallel narratives can be presented about the houses that are not conveyed didactically through text, signage or films, but rather are shown mimetically and communicated through the integral display of things in their interior and exterior spaces. The selection and placing of objects in rooms on display in a curated house assumes a curatorial plausibility and veracity akin to any conventional museum. Things and rooms take on the gesture of an orchestrated exposition that says to the visitor: "Look! ... That is how it is". As conveyed through the restoration work of conservation architects and curators in each of the houses studied, complete rooms are rendered eloquent as visual tableau of carefully considered themes. As Laan and Wierda have remarked in reference to the Sonneveld house: 'The only way to fully experience what the interior looks like today, and the only way to find out more or less what it must have looked like at the time, is to see the final result of the reconstruction with your own eyes.' (Laan & Wierda 2001:133).

The condition of a house and the completeness of its contents at the time of gifting or acquisition obviously has great bearing on the ensuing conservation and curatorial programs. It is interesting to note that large heritage bodies like the National Trust UK are now being much more selective about what houses they will accept and place on public display. Where once they may have acquired properties essentially to protect them, with contents or not, they would now be unlikely to take on a house without a complete collection: it is the 'complete archaeological layering' of a house and its contents which are together deemed to be really significant. This change is indicative of many heritage organisations' shift away from advocacy and towards public education and curatorial projects.

There is also no doubt that a rich collection will potentially satisfy a far wider audience than merely the architectural specialist. And a rich collection and level of interior finish encourages both empathy for, and envy of, the owners of the houses. For example the Sonneveld house in Rotterdam is valued for its display of 'luxuriousness' as rendered in a modernist language. When the wealthy industrialist family moved into their new modern home they took none of their old nineteenth century furniture with them, but instead entered wholeheartedly into a new conception of affluent modern living. Servants were still present, but accommodated under new social conditions, and lustrous surfaces and furnishings were fashioned in modern, industrial materials. Paul Overy writes: 'At this time modernisation, modernity and modernism could be marshalled to represent a variety of political and social fronts and positions – fascist/communist, upper middle-class villas/social housing etc.' (Overy 2006:81). Similarly, the Homewood house set in extensive gardened grounds in Surrey recreates another English vision of the 'Moderne' plush estate. Here again there is no glimmer of socialist or functionalist notions of modern austerity, as characterised by much modern public architecture and housing. Rather this was a bespoke modern design for the bachelor architect-owner, complete with a wealth of modern furniture, the latest in home entertainment gadgets, a fold-away bar, mirrored walk-in robe rooms, and an exotic blue glass chandelier. At one time the servants' wing housed four servant helpers.

Willow Road also came to the National Trust with a full collection of furniture, art and personal objects. More complete than Homewood, and on a less lavish scale in central Hampstead, Willow Road again certainly seeks a balance between architectural and social/biographical interest. Although the émigré architect Erno Goldfinger is now regarded as occupying an important place in British modernism, it has been acknowledged that the National Trust would not have accepted the house on the strength of its architectural value alone. Through the homely display of detailed collections of personal items, the house gives that desired impression that the owners have recently just stepped out of the premises. Through little clues like the brand of Baked Beans left in the kitchen cupboard, visitors can empathise with the recent past. Similarly the Braem house in Antwerp came to Flemish Heritage with the complete contents of the architect-owner Renaat Braem who had lived there for some 40 years. While Kettle’s Yard in Cambridge is perhaps the most extreme example of a modern house where the value resides in the meticulous maintenance of contents and art rather than the architectural design. The owner Jim Ede had accumulated a lifetime’s collection of modern British art, artefacts and everyday objects, and he devoted his later years to maintaining an ‘open house’ in Cambridge for those interested in the...
arts. Ede’s daily routine of cleaning and arranging objects was both ascetically and aesthetically driven: the artful placement of a ring of pebbles on a dresser revealed a much larger life philosophy. And it was this consciously designed tableau of the domestic environment as a ‘total work of art’ that maintains the popularity of the house today.

A sense of completeness in the display of interiors in curated houses ultimately assists in creating an illusion of naturalism and quotidian intimacy that a once private home might be able to conjure to a public audience. For the National Trust UK this illusion occurs through what has been described as ‘an uninterrupted connection between the eye and the actual; real objects that speak to you about the history of that particular place’.17 For most curators and managers spoken to in this study, the impression of a temporary recovery of the everyday past is disrupted by overt in situ interpretation, although others have critiqued this desire for ‘naturalness’, seeing it as indicative of a lack of curatorial guidance and innovation, and ultimately elitist in its presumption of prior knowledge.

In complete contrast to the presentation of domestic completeness, the Red house by Webb and Morris was somewhat controversially purchased by the National Trust UK on the open market and has little remaining by way of interiors. Morris only lived there for five years and a lot of his original finishes and furnishings were seen as ‘experimental’ and ‘theatrical’.18 What did remain was irrevocably altered by subsequent owners, and in some rooms the Morris wallpapers date from well after he actually occupied the house.19 This lack of completeness contributed to the serious reservations that some in the Trust held about taking on the property, given the importance of furnishings to the legacy of William Morris and the expectations of the local visiting public for a ‘complete’ house and garden. In addressing this curatorial challenge, it is currently thought that rather than gather replicas and reconstruct earlier fabric, much will be left largely empty along the lines of the presentation of McKim Mead and White’s Bell House in the USA, however complex questions around what exact period to ‘fix’ the display of the much altered house remains a dilemma.

Duration

The conservation of any building presents choices as to which particular date or period to restore the fabric of the building. Because of their relative newness, modern houses perhaps hold fewer of these dilemmas than are normally inherent in older buildings that are typically a complex palimpsest of additions and accretions. Modern houses offer therefore, in theory, an opportunity to present a ‘single snap-shot’ and a closer approximation of original design intent and ‘authenticity’.20 However despite less choices being apparent, the complexities of capturing a sense of duration and ‘lived time’ within the typical demands of conservation and the cessation of aging, are still profound in modern house museums. Modern construction techniques and materials are often less durable and more unstable than older robust methods and therefore more difficult to conserve. These technical conservation issues have been well discussed elsewhere, but they also impact upon curatorial decisions in modern house museums – for instance paperback book collections and soft cork floors were just two of a number mentioned in the course of this research. In the case study houses examined, approaches range from the total restoration of the house to simulate it as it was when newly designed, to the self-conscious display of wear and tear over time. Guidance on such approaches depends largely on resources available, owner’s intentions for future use, and the documentation available to restorers. For instance in the case of the Sonneveld house, a thorough set of detailed photographs

Figure 5: Kettle’s Yard, Cambridge, UK, 1958 by Jim Ede
of the house just after completion provided a reference-point to restore back to a semblance of original newness. The decision was taken to show visitors the house of 1933 as testament to the architect’s original intentions to design a unique ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’ of that moment in time. While at Willow Road, the duration of time that the Goldfinger family lived in the house is partially captured, and similarly at the Homewood, where the decision has been made, for example, to retain the rather extraordinary dark brown kitchen added in the 1970s.

House museums, like other heritage sites, have been criticised for their tendency to ‘freeze’ the histories of buildings and objects into just one specific context (Cabray/Cabral 2001:42). For Aynsley, the reconstructed modern room tableau recreated in a museum setting delivers this ‘frozen moment’: it is not possible to incorporate into a reconstruction the ways that the occupants lived in and customised the architect’s work. In contrast the complete house museum does offer some opportunities to attempt the transcendence of such a fixity of moment (Aynsley 2006:18). This can be approached in a number of ways, from the core conservation strategies about what to restore and remove and how to resolve building fatigue, to the display and interpretation strategies that follow. At Willow Road for instance, the time lived in the house by the Goldfinger family is consciously recreated – used bars of soap received delicate curatorial attention, and new cork pin-up boards were stained with tea to resemble natural fading.

Another way of countering the deathly hand of fossilisation can be found in the manner that houses are visited and used, for how long, and for what purposes. Across the case study houses examined there appears indeed considerable variation in the management and duration of use by the public and by tenants of the properties. Accessibility ranges from the highly staged tour, to the free-roaming visit, to opportunities to stay in the houses or use them for extended functions. These differences are amplified by, and highly contingent upon, the original donors’ wishes and the current managing bodies’ resources. At Willow Road, despite the outward appearances of homeliness, it is now a public urban museum, and has had to accommodate all the logistics of this official change of status. Similarly the Sonneveld house now forms one of a collection of public museums in the heart of Rotterdam managed by the neighbouring Netherlands Architecture Institute. In contrast, upon Patrick Gwynne’s insistence the Homewood remains an inhabited property, preferably by a family tenant. This condition was presumably motivated by Gwynne’s wish to avoid the total ‘museumification’ of the house. It has had significant impact on how it can be displayed and visited. The current tour-guide for the Braem house was very much involved in its conservation and now lives there, and his occupation has also affected visitor accessibility and experience. Likewise, to date, the Boyd house has been occupied in various capacities and the intention is to foster appreciation of the property through use, rather than the fleeting and staged tour. This strategy provides a promising model for the appreciation of ‘duration’. And while provision for a live-in tenant and extended private uses for properties obviously places many other challenges on the conservation of furnishings and contents, the benefits brought may be a richer appreciation of domestic inhabitation and messy liveability.

**Transformations**

Three concluding points are raised here and left open for further interrogation. First, while all conservation involves profound change and reconstruction, these changes are particularly acute when enacting any transformation from a private dwelling to a public amenity and museum.
At Kettle’s Yard for instance, all efforts have been made to maintain the routines of everyday life established by Ede. However, as Sebastiano Barassi has suggested, the trajectory of change after Ede’s departure is one of inevitable ‘transformation from a private home to a professionally run organisation.’ (Sebastiano Barassi 2002:12). These transformations – wrought through both conservation and curatorial strategies – result in uncanny representations of domestic and intimate settings of everyday life. Anthony Vidler has explored the implications of the uncanny as the unheimlich or ‘ unhomely’, and the intimate relations between the homely and the unhomely or the familiar and the strange, in the history of architecture. Vidler explores the uncanny home through themes like haunted houses and ruins, homesickness and nostalgia produced as a reaction to the ‘geometric cube’ houses of modernism (Vidler 1992:27 & 65).

To Vidler’s exploration we could add the curated modern house as another powerful exemplar of the architectural uncanny; a meta-museum of the unhomely, where former functions, personalities, daydreams and mess have been permanently expunged. This sense of unease emanates from the representation of the familiar image of a house that is in fact no longer a house and no longer homely. It is arguably this perception of the unhomely that is precisely what curators and heritage organisations strive to counter, but its shadow never quite departs. As a visitor today, one approaches these houses with mixed expectations of both the authority of a museum and the voyeuristic pleasures of visiting a ‘home-open’. This uncanny mixture of associations is felt acutely at the Sonneveld house that is now a recognised public ‘young monument’ in the middle of the city centre. Yet it is one that tells an intimate story, in part made possible by the involvement of the family’s grandson in the project, who has remarked on his strange experience of returning to the now restored house of his childhood memories.

Second, the transformation from private house to public amenity, all the case study houses have, despite deceptive appearances, undergone profound changes that aim to purify original design intentions and to distil coherent narratives from their original chaotic state prior to their restoration. As Cabray has suggested, house museums often preserve the ‘leftovers’ of everyday life that don’t belong in other institutions or archives (Cabral 2001:41). The preservation of these leftovers in curated houses inevitably involves, as in any museum, tactics of selection, alteration, distillation and fabrication. A number of commentators interviewed in the course of this research have referred to the desire to preserve some semblance of the muddled vitality of the original houses. For instance the conservator of the Braem house described the most confronting issue of the restoration project as the sorting and sifting of objects deemed of value or junk in an over-stuffed and decaying property.23 While the somewhat incongruous florid Austro-Hungarian candelabra at Willow Road, which sits on an elegant, modern sideboard designed by Erno Goldfinger, is included as evidence of the idiosyncrasies of personal life. As one curator said; ‘it is part of the package, so you don’t try and alter it, you show what people are – which is a mess’.24 Similarly, the inclusion of the Viennese silver-set at the Seidler House has already been mentioned. However, these curatorial decisions are exceptions and usually highly orchestrated deceptions. In fact all the houses displayed have, by necessity, been completely and utterly altered, edited, distilled and purified from the muck and tumble of everyday life into clean exemplars of modernism. A statement by the curators of the Sonneveld house powerfully illustrate this point: ‘It is necessary to reconstruct the original state perfectly if the atmosphere, hygiene and comfort of this house are to be conveyed as clearly as possible... reconstructed in as pure a form as possible.’ (Paijmans & Molenaar 2001:159).

Paul Overy has eloquently summarised that period rooms are ‘no longer those rooms or houses themselves, however much they resemble them, or the photographs by which they are so often known.’(Overy 2006:74). So if these curated houses are no longer quite houses in the common sense we understand houses to be, what kind of places, documents or monuments have they become? Through their restoration and interpretation, curated houses and their contents can perhaps best be considered as having been transformed from ‘found objects’ into both historical documents and a kind of monument that communicates architectural and social significance to others. Michel Foucault speaks of this transformation as fundamental to the very processes of making modern histories, through which the work enacted on material documentation (books, texts, accounts, registers, acts, buildings institutions, laws, techniques, objects, customs, etc.) changes them into historical monuments of our time:
where, in the past, history deciphered the traces left by men, it now deploys a mass of elements that have to be grouped, made relevant, placed in relation to one another to form totalities … it might be said that in our time history aspires to the condition of archaeology, to the intrinsic description of the monument. (Foucault 1994:7).

In the case of significant house exemplars discussed in this paper, such transformations enacted by conservation, interpretation and display allows them to be absorbed into the historical canon of architectural precedents. Yet it also renders their definition complex and unique; as a genre of representation they slip between the original built artefact and its simulation. Thus, in conclusion, the peculiar form of display exhibited in curated modern houses resides somewhere between an authentic facsimile of reality, a display or illusory theatre, a set of historical documents, and a monument.

References


The National Trust, 1996, *2 Willow Road*, London: The National Trust


**Endnotes**

1 Whiteley is commenting on the National Trust UK’s decision to acquire Willow Road by Erno Goldfinger, and in this review launches a stinging attack on the, at that time, rather sudden embracing of examples of English modernism into the sanctioned canon of English heritage.

2 For one discussion on the links between exhibiting modern rooms and modernism see Aynsley 2006.

3 This account does not attempt to summarise basic histories of the case study houses as these have been well documented in many other sources.

4 Although at first being under the auspices of the National Trust of Victoria, who initially assisted in gaining a mortgage for the property, the Boyd Foundation has since become independent. It curates an ongoing program to secure financial support from individuals and corporations to maintain the property in public hands. At the time of researching this paper the Foundation had not completed a full long-term conservation plan.

5 The conservation program and restoration work for both Willow Road and Homewood have been carried out by John Allan and Avanti Architects, UK.

6 See, for example, Macdonald nd:85-91; Macdonald, Normandin & Kindred 2007; and Prudon 2008.

7 Interview with representatives, curators and conservation architects at the National Trust UK offices in London, July 2007.

8 Interview with representatives, curators and conservation architects at the National Trust UK offices in London, July 2007.

9 Interview with representatives, curators and conservation architects at the National Trust UK offices in London, July 2007.

10 Interview with representatives, curators and conservation architects at the National Trust UK offices in London, July 2007.

11 Interview with representatives, curators and conservation architects at the National Trust UK offices in London, July 2007.

12 Interview with representatives, curators and conservation architects at the National Trust UK offices in London, July 2007.

13 Interview with representatives, curators and conservation architects at the National Trust UK offices in London, July 2007. At this meeting one area discussed was the role of films in interpretation, with one participant commenting that the film seemed appropriate at Willow Road as they had footage available which gave a sense of the architect’s voice: ‘The Willow Road film was hugely successful … But there were then lots of other properties thinking “we want a film” – where there was just going to be what I call BBC tea and cake faded shots of roses.’

14 For a discussion on the evocation of everyday social value in the Seidler House see Teague 2006:130.
Mieke Bal calls this assumed authority of exposure ‘apo-deictic’: ‘affirmative, demonstrative and authoritative on the one hand, and opinionated on the other’. See Bal 1996:2-3.

Interview with representatives, curators and conservation architects at the National Trust UK offices in London, July 2007.

Interview with representatives, curators and conservation architects at the National Trust UK offices in London, July 2007.

Interview with representatives, curators and conservation architects at the National Trust UK offices in London, July 2007. ‘The philosophy that we are gradually evolving is that that is its moment of real significance as the cauldron and crucible that fed into Morris & co and that to import Morris things from a later period would be to dilute and undermine that essence.’

Since writing this study, original murals have come to light under existing layers of paint and wallpaper, which have greatly added to the heritage value and authenticity of the interiors.

Interview with representatives, curators and conservation architects at the National Trust UK offices in London, July 2007.

Life is not reproduced in a house museum, it is represented – like any other museum, which is, par excellence, the space for representing the world and its things. Moreover, objects have histories and trajectories, and the reconstruction of ambience ‘freezes’ the objects into just one specific context.’ See Cabral 2001:42.

When I visited the house in 2007, it was not yet open to the public in part because of delays in finding a suitable tenant that could live in, and have open access to, all parts of the house.

Interview with conservator and curator of the Braem House, July 2007.

Interview with representatives, curators and conservation architects at the National Trust UK offices in London, July 2007.