LIVING ROOMS WE DON’T LIVE IN ANYMORE

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts in the Furniture Design Department of the Rhode Island School of Design.

by

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Abstract

During my time at RISD, I have discovered terms and theories such as defensible space, socio physical phenomena, the Savannah Hypothesis, Christopher Alexanders Intimacy Gradient. All of these things have been amalgamating into a defensible argument to the intuitive feelings I’ve had my whole life, and have been attempting to imbue into my work. If anything, my thesis body of work is one next step in a lifelong pursuit of discovering what it is to live- how to define and manipulate the intangible bounds of human life and experience; of the millions of tiny moments and decisions that make up the every new moment that is contemporary life. A question that has always plagued me has been whether or not to practice architecture or furniture design as a medium to most effectively distort and attempt to enhance the ways we live domestically. Do I change the walls that direct our space, or do I change the filling that is bound by those wall? Is it possible to change the ways we build, or is the evolution of our construction inevitable? An important moment that marks a takeaway as I move forward was in a course where a science professor was talking about a home in Alaska where the children has wheelchairs, so they lived mostly in a large open space with plastic curtains for walls to contain the heat. He then presented the question- “why do we have walls?”, as they are mostly unnecessary and costly. This moment was so mundane yet so incredibly exciting for me- to imagine spaces completely different from those were used to today in the future… perhaps modeled after Buckminster Fullers geodesic domes. I believe that the future of our architecture is changing, and hand in hand with which our furniture will change as well. I believe I now have the courage and resources coming out of my graduate education to pursue work that isn’t condemned by our architectural condition, but liberated by it.

My work responds to architecture as well as furniture archetypes; to walls, to how I’ve grown up. It asks questions of them, takes inspiration from them, and stands aside from them.
A Thesis:
As I’ve transitioned from ‘childhood’ into a perhaps fabricatied notion of ‘adulthood’, I have certainly undergone a series of changes. Mostly, I have become increasingly aware of the syntheticness of the word ‘adult’, its perceived connotations and feelings, and the way becoming and abiding by being one puts artificial contraints on the way we live. The big question for me concerning the ways we live has always been about our spaces, our architecture, the ways in which we move through the word socially, morally, psychologically and sociophysically. Our architecture and furniture as seen from an aerial view acts as a concomittant display of our patterns, more intimately our furniture and interiors show our relationship to the rest of the universe. Our perceived world is so tiny compared to the reality of the space we inhabit on this earth.

I have learned to think of humans as animals of this earth, contrary to how we commonly perceive ourselves (as ‘other’). I have learned this through the lenghty pursuit of knowledge, that stemmed from my innate sensibility for not feeling at home in the artificial spaces we create for ourselves. As beautiful and poetic as our homes can be and are, how they envelop our memory and reveal parts of us that we think have long since forgotten, they stifle a physical need that has long been lost through the pursuit of seperating ourselves from nature, which until recently society saw as wild, untamed, and undesirable. Now that we have decided that nature is good, useful to study etc., we’re scrambling to try and fix the damage we have done. I say that the damage isn’t just to our world, it is to us. We have lost such an intense vernacular socio-physical knowledge of how to read our landscapes, how to activate ourselves both mentally and physically- how to live in sync with ourselves, our bodies- especially as we change from children into adults. This is evident in our general lack in health, again, both mentally and physically.

I urge us to regain and practice those sensibilities, to listen to our bod- ies, our intuition, to question the mores of our architecutre, our building, how it stifles our interiors, our experience and understanding of the world outside of ‘human’, to stray from the path of something that is entirely abstrackted from what ‘human’ might be, as we’ve already so completely altered this world and ourselves that there is no real going back, but only hope of forward progress. Let us question the walls that we so closely cling to as a safety net. Let us cling to them when we need them, and find the courage to step out into the world with confidence, strentgh, love, and empathy by experiencing and learning as much as we possibly can in this life not just in books, but with our breath, muscles, bones, posture, and individual grace. May that be what we pass on.

In today's capitalist society, we seem to have different interior landscapes in every other home. The 'rules' for how and why one makes choices in decorating a domestic environment seem to follow consumerist culture—ever changing trends that result in a sort of obsession over certain aesthetics. I recently visited my parents in Westminster, Maryland, a town which used to be a small dairy farming community which over the past 50 years has become suburbanized, and grown rapidly. On the outskirts of the town remain the old farming families, which is where my parents now live. A neighbor dropped by, came inside, and did a quick survey of the kitchen and living room. The house was originally built in the late 18th century, with two sections added subsequently over the years. It has recently been redone in a style that joins the vernacular of the house with more modern aesthetic ideals. The second floor in the middle section was removed to make for natural sunlight and an open contemporary kitchen with an island, revealing the bones of the house— the fireplaces and hand-hewn beams remain and whisper something of the past at the superimposed new interior. The living room was done in a more Americanized Neo-classical style; old paintings, upholstered furniture, wooden wainscoting and a hidden television in an old fireplace. This peculiar gentleman came inside, waved a hand and said “pretty nice”, and continued to describe to me for ten minutes his new house being built up the road across from their old. The building's facade is being made of metal panels to function as a combination of a summer home and garage for the Recreational Vehicle he and his wife travel in during the winter months. The exterior takes on the aesthetic of a large machine shed or storage building. The interior has vaulted ceilings with one central room that includes the kitchen and living room with a radial bedroom and office overlooking the valley. The neighbor took great effort to exclaim about his quartz countertops and 65” Ultra HD Smart television set, verily convinced that these things are what a house should contain, and that this building was what must be revered as a most admirable home.

This man's notion of good design differs so drastically with that of my parents, that listening to him describe this new architectural anomaly was uncomfortable, perhaps slightly comical. Trying to decide what to glean from the conversation, I began to think about personal taste versus styles and trends, which home really was “better”, despite my immediate judgments on the act of making choices when it comes to actively pursuing the creation of a domestic environment. The decisions of my parents when decorating their home were mostly driven by a desire to portray 'good taste' to those who might visit. The neighbor did that as well, but interestingly wasn't bound by a specific vision of 'style', rather than specific items and materials he understood to be valuable. He thereby became known to me a sort of 'taste outlier'.
Today, the decorative arts commonly concern the collective “atmosphere” created by an amalgamation of objects from Target or Crate and Barrel that may be sparsely used but part of a “scene” or trend in general appearance. Michael Benedikt writes of the “aboutness” of art and architecture—building and creating in attempts to say something, rather than assessing what is “real”. “We must either drop ‘art’ and assign to real architecture a special amounts of its own, or we must drop the requirement of aboutness entirely, and have architecture simply ‘be itself’ without being about anything”². I feel as though decoration has become a kit of parts. We choose the same carpets, the same clocks, the plush-est sofas which surround and idolize the oversized television on the wall. This resonance of things that has been lost as interiors have become so arbitrary that we forget it hasn't always been this way. In Arjun Appadurai’s words, we are at best “choosers” of our environments, and do not recognize our own agency in creating an ambiance with personal items that aren’t perpetuated entirely by commercialism and commercials, or more likely we perhaps are tricked into a false sense of agency when we are allowed to choose one of four fabric choices for our sofas³. We also seem to have trouble being able to consider the architecture of our homes, the difference between the filling and the casement, the relationship between the architecture and the furnishings. We are perhaps limited by the boundaries the square walls of our homes create around our imagination.

I am concerned with the issue of style and taste versus the actual human need for furniture, and the way it is able to dictate domestic life. I see style, material and aesthetics as secondary to use, yet complimentary to a person’s physical relationship and presence concerning the ways we are able to interact with and dictate our own interiors in our own homes. I see furniture as a means to assess those relationships, and question my overall design goals and the means to achieve them.

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Questions that arise are thus: Is it possible to change the relationship between the modern man or woman and their ideals on how to relate to their environment? Is it moral to strive to achieve this? Is this even possible through design, or is it only attainable through changing the mores of commercial culture? It is imperative for designers to understand the state of things. How does elitist design trickle down to popular taste (what is the reality of our objects)? What is lost or gained in doing so? What becomes of the interpretation of insightful thoughtful design, how does it manifest in the real world and what are the consequences? How can we understand the different perspectives of the designer vs that of the consumer? How do we surpass the limits of style and attempt to create a better future of human inhabited space by looking at the present and past? How can we utilize style and branding not as a basis for beautiful design, but as a basis for reaching people? For reevaluating and responding to our evolving sociophysical vernacular?

I do not mean to say that style and trend should be abolished, as perhaps only radicals like Diogenes have been able to achieve whilst living in a barrel. I believe that ascribing to a style is human nature, as is change, and that both should be unanimously accepted. I believe that rather than style and aesthetics as a concentration of design, we should put our efforts into the lived experience, by both designing objects that speak more to us and that speak more to each other. By utilizing architecture and furniture objects as means to direct our collective culture in a more active manner rather than trying to control style or aesthetics, design will become relevant to the way we hope to live once more.

4 The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. “Diogenes.” Encyclopædia Britannica. December 15, 2016. https://www.britannica.com/biography/Diogenes-Greek-philosopher. “For Diogenes the simple life meant not only disregard of luxury but also disregard of laws and customs of organized, and therefore “conventional,” communities. The family was viewed as an unnatural institution to be replaced by a natural state in which men and women would be promiscuous and children would be the common concern of all. Though Diogenes himself lived in poverty, slept in public buildings, and begged his food, he did not insist that all men should live in the same way but merely intended to show that happiness and independence were possible even under reduced circumstances.”
Bernard Rudofsky is advocate for vernacular architecture as a viable way of discovering a deeper meaning of architectural language. “The beauty of this [vernacular] architecture has long been dismissed as accidental, but today we should be able to recognize it as the result of rare good sense in the handling of practical problems. The shapes of the houses, sometimes transmitted through a hundred generations, seem eternally valid, like those of their tools. Above all, it is the humaneness of this architecture that ought to bring forth some response in us.”

Rudofsky speaks about the difference between a builder and an architect, how they make different decisions based out of necessity and durability rather than perhaps trends in material or form. This raw manner of addressing the need for a space, building, or object results in less polluted modest (not modern) cultures of making. He says, “I believe that sensory pleasure should take precedence over intellectual pleasure in art and architecture.”

Similarly, sensorial moments I have experienced or witnessed become inspiration for my own work based on the use of things regardless of their intended function. The moment where a wide windowsill becomes a place to sit and read; when a series of round straw bales come across in a field become a scaffold for a race; where the landing of a staircase becomes their own space for children to play and listen to family below, comfortably close while still allowing for agency in their own imagined adventure; when a hidden door opens to a staircase in an old house that wants to tell you its story of another time.

6 Rudofsky p. 5
Climb, 2016-17, Steel, Ash, Milk Paint, Leather. 40"x variable
Climb, 2016-17, Steel, Ash, Milk Paint, Leather. 40"x variable
Correlated with these moments of intriguing vernacular movements, we can notice also that the social language of the way we interact with our furniture is evolving. An increased formality in social spaces we have come to have no qualms with reclining postures- to an extreme where it is now commonplace for laying on the sofa when company is over- something even 50 years ago would have been intolerable. Surely certain extents of formalized interactions are a necessary tool utilized by our culture in order to effectively communicate. We must understand how and why that language changes, evolves, and what it says about us at any given time. Our society is reactionary- this de-formalization of posturing is indicates a want for freedom from constraints of the past- pushing against the conditioned rules of our cultures history based on the past, and not necessarily conducive in contemporary society. It is the past, present, and perhaps outlook to possible futures that most fully describes the contemporary condition. One way to recognize the small ways in which we are evolving socially is through observation. It is becoming evident in younger generations that we have a different social structure when it comes to entertaining and coming together in groups. In recent history, the kitchen was a room for work, hidden from guests. Entertaining was held in living spaces. Today’s kitchen has evolved into the center of the household- space for standing and gathering around an island- designed to be large open spaces. I overheard a friend recently say that sitting in the living room is “too much commitment” for him. He feels a need for an easy exit at any given time, and the formalities that come along with inhabiting that type of space seem confining. We perhaps have a more introverted generation than those before us where socializing was more built into ways of life and education.
One could say that we are becoming less civilized—though I believe we should embrace these more natural tendencies being exhibited by people as a reflection of our evolution. We eat in public spaces (ew), have cell phones at dinner, put our feet up on other chairs, sit on the floor, perch on chairs. There is a sort of a de-civilization happening, that is allowing for a lot more comfort in modern spaces, which characterizes our contemporary culture very well in light of new technologies and a new breed of casual businesses. The homes of tomorrow might be characterized by comfort and casualness, but hopefully taking into consideration the necessity of natural influences. We can take hints from sociology and psychology of encountering objects to understand human behavior when interacting with environments—our evolutionary need for the concept of “prospect and refuge”.

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“Prospect and refuge theory was first proposed by English geographer Jay Appleton in 1975 to describe the reason why certain environments feel secure or meet human needs. One of the principle needs Appleton identifies is the capacity to observe (prospect) without being seen (refuge)...Hildebrand identifies that prospect and refuge may result, intuitively in the work of an architect who sets out to control the environment which frames open and bright spaces. He also applied his variation of the theory to ceiling heights, the size of terraces and the spatial complexity of a design.”
Refuge Sofa, 2017, Steel, Oak, Leather, Linen. 46”x27”x34”
“There are valued times in almost everyone’s experience when a world is perceived afresh: perhaps after a rain as the sun glistens on the streets and windows watch a departing cloud, or, alone when ones sees again the roundness of an apple. At these times our perceptions are not all sentimental. They are, rather, matter of fact, neutral and undesiring- yet suffused with an unreasoned joy at the simple correspondence of appearance and reality, at the evident rightness of things as they are. It is as though the sound and feel of a new car door closing with a kerchunk! were magnified and extended to dwell in the look, sound, smell, and feel of all things.”

8 Benedikt, For an Architecture of Reality, p. 2

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The (traditional) barn is a vernacular building that emerged from necessity to house grain and animals. The form and structure emerged out of working knowledge of local and common resources (wood, sometimes forged hardware). Many barns are put together like a puzzle. The structure is assembled from start to finish in only one order, and can be disassembled in the opposite order so that it may be moved if necessary. The barn has no one designer; it was engineered over hundreds of years by thousands of people passing down knowledge and experiences. The form has changed very little even in modern times out of lack of necessity. A barn is a thing with real significance and presence not only in function, but in culture, in use. Although it may have an symbolic meaning of rural lifestyle, a barn is unapologetically itself. Above all things, a barn is a building that surrounds work, life, and sometimes play. A barn is not just a shell that encapsulates whatever is inside. Its function has evolved into something far more exquisite. Built into the beams are ladders to high platforms which can be used for storage; over the course of the year carts and trucks are backed inside between wide sliding doors to unload hay for animals over the winter, when they remain mostly inside and cannot graze on pasture; trap doors in the floor lead to the barnyard where bails of hay can be tossed to animals; barn swallows that prey on insects fly in and out of high open windows and nest in the rafters. A barn is almost a living thing; so much life inside of something must certainly mean it is alive as well. Even when latent, a barn exudes remnants of such a life. One can explore the trap doors, marvel at the joinery, climb up the ladders and jump into piles of straw. A barn is adaptable in light of its emptiness, its unequivocal directness, and withstands the tests of time. If a building is made Architecture by the life lived inside of that space, then a barn is indeed that.
In attempts to create furniture that exudes the feelings that I value, I look back to the places that instigated my own interest in understanding the ways we use and curate spaces. The place that first comes to mind is the hunting cabin that I have been visiting a few times a year since I was born. The cabin where we currently stay sits on around 600 acres in Baker, West Virginia, accessible only via a ford in the Lost River. The original cabin on the property had no indoor plumbing and was heated with a wood stove. There was a sink under a spigot outside for washing dishes with water from a nearby creek. The small cabin was previously occupied by a woman and her 12 children before the land was purchased by a few men, including my grandfather, who later used the land for hunting. Over a hundred years the wooden cabin began to sag, and eventually was torn down, burnt and buried. The new cabin is an environment built for those who spend most of their time outside or working; habits that evolved while growing up in the old cabin, which was dimly lit, cramped, and sparsely furnished. With only some old sagging mattresses thrown over old springy bed frames, a large table with benches for meals that barely nestled into the room next to a bed underneath the staircase, and a folding chair or two in front of the wood stove or outdoor fire, the place was always a comfort. My family built the new cabin themselves. A relative in Charles Town owns a construction business and was able to get cheap materials and machinery up to the property to build fairly quickly. It’s built of cedar and pine, with little to no architectural ornamentation. It was designed sparsely to accommodate a crew during hunting season, to have a large kitchen and living space for meals, with a screened in porch for firewood and meals in the summertime. The main room is two stories high with exposed beams that run the length of the cabin and allow two large windows at the top of the west wall to let in as much low evening winter light as possible during cold days until the sun sets behind the mountains. At night from outside they glow with warmth like eyes. The staircase up to the small loft area on the second floor is a series of rise and runs-- treads that end with a tacked on rail for the older folks. The top landing has no rail at all. The loft runs the length of half the cabin- it is a narrow hallway with four mattresses on either side, with no partitions, to sleep as many people as possible during hunting season. When family comes, it fills up with children first. The downstairs below is another hallway with four other bedrooms for the owners of the cabin, with a full bathroom and second toilet/utility room which has a water heater that must be turned on and off whenever you come in or out so the pipes don’t freeze. The water comes from a nearby well. There is an outdoor shower, which is the preferred one, and a spigot outside over a stump that is commonly used for gutting fish, squirrels and turkey. There is a side porch that overlooks a clearing, as well as a screened in porch on the front of the house. In the warmer months all meals are taken outside.
The living space is an open kitchen, an island, a long table to accommodate everyone for dinner, a TV that only runs with a VCR that is hardly ever plugged in, considering there is no internet or phone service. The wood stove is the center of attention in the cold months, and there is a fireplace opposite it to use when needed. There are a few couches that hold piles of people in the evenings when it’s dark and too cold or wet for a fire outside. The days are spent either cooking meals, doing dishes, hiking, hunting, or sitting in the river in a lawn chair on the property that contains a few dirt roads and a pond that backs up to more wilderness.

This place is so resounding for me not only because of its proximity in nature, but because of the break with formality that it creates, that is sort of outside the confines of material cultural conditioning. This is a space where form literally follows function- but also follows affordability, accessible construction materials, and whatever furniture we all had lying around to furnish the place. It yields a certain warmth that I find is seldom in many urbane homes. Perhaps it is also worth noting that nature is commonly a source of inspiration in my work and life. It represents an avenue of life that is devoid of consumerist temptations; where we learn to run and climb as children. It is a liminal space between cultured society and wilderness- a space where our proximity to nature lends a hand in experiencing and interpreting it; adding it into our lives effortlessly, where a culture of outdoor activities and traditions grow around it.
“The other thing about modern society and why it causes this anxiety, is that we have nothing at its center that is non-human. We are the first society to be living in a world where we don’t worship anything other than ourselves….which is, I think, why we’re particularly drawn to nature. Not for the sake of our health, though it’s often presented that way, but because it’s an escape from the human anthill. It’s an escape from our own competition, and our own dramas. And that’s why we enjoy looking at glaciers and oceans, and contemplating the Earth from outside its perimeters, etc. We like to feel in contact with something that is non-human, and that is so deeply important to us.”  

Alain de Botton describes this phenomena, or fetishization of nature in a Ted talk in which he considers the ever changing values of larger society. In this way, it is important for us to cull out themes of what we think is important, and why...
The playground in my backyard as a child has been an inspiration over and over again in my work. Perhaps because I spent so much time with it—my brothers, friends and I tested the extends of its abilities in many ways over the years. The playground was built by my grandfather in our backyard under four tall hemlock trees. There were monkey bars on one side of the body of the structure, which also had a crude rope ladder and wooden slide, and on the other side a swing set. The body of the playground was built of large 4x4 posts driven into the ground connected horizontally by metal tube rungs. Two 2’x4’ plywood panels served as platforms that could be set on any rung so that they were either side by side or staggered inside the structure, slightly resembling scaffolding. Having the ability to move the heavy panels inside the structure of the playground was an incredible tool for our young imaginations. We could sit up high and look over the fence around the neighborhood, climb from the structure to panel to swing set, remove the panels altogether and the empty cage became a jail. I believe it was the first realization of agency in not only our daily make-believe, but in our real physical environment. Spending most of our time outside as children, it became our own home— with no walls but surely with a sense of security and symbiosis— not quite authorship. We would sometimes grab a long board from the garage and set it between the two swings so that it became a swinging bench, where the four of us children could all swing at the same time. One summer my parents bought a new garden hose. We took the old one and tied it in a web back and forth under the monkey bars which became a hammock like climbing space. We tied a rope from a tree to a post on the playground, and made a zip line out a dog leash that you could hook onto a pulley, and stick your foot in the looped end to slide down to the ground. The playground taught us to seek out excitement and sometimes danger, to push the boundaries of what we had at hand, and to never be bored.
Step Stool, 2017, Pine, Leather, Nails, Rope, Stain. 24"x24"x24"
Similarly, I spent about half my time as a young child at my best friend’s house a few blocks away from my own. In his basement there was a sectional sofa, about 6 separate pieces that could be arranged a few different ways with corner units, middle units and ends. We spent a grand amount of time as architects and builders—somehow carrying the sofas back and forth around the basement, flipping them over, and creating forts with blankets and pillows covering the holes so no light could get in. We would use books, bricks or stones as weights to hold the blankets in place where they couldn't not be tucked in tight enough to the sofa. We would have secret entrances, hallways, rooms. Working with this set of parameters we must have over time created a hundred different compositions with the sofas and whatever else we could get our hands on. The basement was our space to do as we pleased. This affordance of some sort of freedom in my childhood to create a space of my own— to experiment with layouts, rooms, and sometimes the social aspects of letting others into my personal space gave me an agency of creation, control and excitement that I strive to recreate in my work always. Had our family friends purchased a different sofa for their basement, perhaps I would not be a designer.
Body language has become interesting concerning the ways in which we interact with other people in social situations as well as spaces; our socio physical condition. It has in itself developed its own sort of vernacular. We respond differently to places we know, things we are comfortable with, or things we don’t yet understand. Personal body language represents the individual ways in which we move through the world. It is in some ways universal, and in some very unique. We learn a lot about the way we move through the world via the things that we use…. our clothing, our appliances, our slippers and shoes, the rugs we have on the floor, how we bend down to get into our cars to go to work, the comfortable spot we find to sit back and read a book with a blanket. There is a certain gracefulness that is the collective knowledge and use that navigates all of these things. To watch the nuances of a single person and the way they use things, where they are clumsy; where they move quickly is to watch their experience, things that have happened and taught them over the years that even they have forgotten. There is also a spectrum of ways we interact with others based on the body language. Christopher Alexander’s “Intimacy Gradient” explains how homes are designed following our emotions- the more intimately we know someone, the deeper we allow them into our living spaces. More personally, some of us are more naturally engaged in social situations. Some of us tend to want to retreat to defensible spaces, such as walls near the back of a room to sit back from a crowd, perhaps near an exit. I believe that the furniture we use today is based on a historically formal and antiquely homogenized idea of body language, that puts the range of physical languages on the same playing field. Its easy to see why this seems like a good idea--it puts people together so that they may have a conversation democratically. Proper eye contact, evidence of attentiveness and respect, direct understanding that someone is engaged or not engaged. In eastern cultures, being physically above or higher than someone is a sign of dominance. I thing that neither tropes must persist, and that we may evolve a culture where individual characters are able to be made out by body language alone- wether someone resolves to work on the floor and move freely, wether someone likes to climb or escape etc. Increasing formality could allow a break with the past- and afford more animal like natural tendencies to prevail and become not only acceptable but understood and encouraged.

10 Alexander, Christopher, Sara Ishikawa, and Murray Silverstein. A pattern language: towns, buildings, construction. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977. “Pattern #127 - Intimacy Gradient: Conflict: Unless the spaces in a building are arranged in a sequence which corresponds to their degrees of privateness, the visits made by strangers, friends, guests, clients, family, will always be a little awkward. Resolution: Lay out the spaces of a building so that they create a sequence which begins with the entrance and the most public parts of the building, then leads into the slightly more private areas, and finally to the most private domains.”
I do not, however, think that this is how all furniture should be in every situation, from a classroom setting to a dining table to a living room, where we share the same surfaces and all sit at the same height, keeping us all within relatively the same eye level. By experimenting outside of the archetypical ways we occupy spaces, other than in a homogenized way, I believe we will be more comfortable in our own way, our own bodies, and be able to more actively be aware of ourselves, and thus contribute to conversations both within homogenized scenarios and without. In that sense, exploring different forms of furniture outside of the familiar could be more democratic overall than expecting the same of everyone in social interactions, as our current furniture does. By exploring the language of a room by filling it differently, inverting use of planes, changing physical perspective/behavior by sitting by walls or floor, perches, staircases, challenging lethargic style of repose with moving furniture, we may become more aware of the room as a volume, not things set in the middle; a false value on the stage of interiors style, not life. The more we use things, the more we challenge ourselves, the more we have to learn from the objects that question that relationship, the more we will add to that collective gracefulness, through bumps and falls that ultimately let us discover or learn something, to participate in the movement of the world, to develop the human vernacular.
Squat Stool, 2017, Maple, Milk Paint. 14”x7”xVariable heights
The answers to my quandaries perhaps may be uncovered through reconstituting a set of peripheral values to be imbued in the environment itself; to eradicate the support of bad habits that enhance a sedentary society. Architecture, furniture and other designed objects are capable of acting as cultural catalysts. Designers, therefore, must not be blind to the content of that which they campaign via the aesthetics, function, and eventual use of their work. Various recent movements in architecture, specifically the perpetuation and exaggeration of Modernist forms have shown the lack of reverence for the comfort in our environments. We can look at how homes and public buildings have changed due to advances in technology and trends in form and material, and the idealization of the designer as artist. It is, after all, the sign of a good designer to be able to integrate human needs, technology, resources, ever-changing culture, and economy together. In those terms, good design is hard and sometimes impossible to recognize. The best design perhaps blends in so well it goes unnoticed. A large flaw in these pursuits, perhaps the most swaying deterrent of good design is the branding of oneself, the lure of becoming well known, well published on social media. Designers fall victim to the same cycle as consumers—blindly partaking in designs that look right, that feel good, but do not perhaps contain a vision other than to satiate an immediate craving for attention and validation from others. The hardest thing to do as designers may well be finding a way to give ourselves license to think differently, to have contrasting or alternative values than our peers that give us little return unless fought for. In Andrew Ballantyne’s essay “The Nest and the Pillar of Fire”, he speaks of the intention of a young architect, eager for the chance to prove an aptitude for the built environment. Ballantyne states that “what we think of as architecture at any given time will depend on what our culture has prepared us to expect”. Currently, there is high reverence for the designer or artist. Architects attempt to develop clever styles to personally stand out or advance the field.
Argillite, 2015-17, Stone, Felt, Steel. Variable Dimensions
Argillite, 2015-17, Stone, Steel. Variable Dimensions
“So we can hold on to the idea of cultural significance as something which separates ‘mere’ buildings from architecture - the actual fabric of buildings is not sufficient to make architecture of them, but the buildings turn into architecture when we feel that we should notice them and treat them with respect, and this can happen to any building. Architecture on this view is not something inherent in the buildings by themselves, but is a cultural matter which involves the buildings.”

Ballantyne notes that this is what makes a building architecture, not just a building, and that the intentions of the designer have become misguided- indistinguishable from larger cultural ideals. There stands to be a call for more of a responsibility in designers as, producers of the goods that surround us, to understand those cultural mores in a larger context.

12 Ballantyne p. 12
A chair is an ugly thing. The typology has evolved over hundreds of years from initial use as a throne to its eventual commonplace existence in western culture. Aesthetically, a chair resembles nothing from nature. It is simply a surface on which to sit, and another on which to lean. These two functions I believe are being strangled by being confined to one ruling archetype. What might the world of interiors look like if this trope were to relinquish itself? The most exciting moment in recent furniture history for me is the break of the upholstered sofa into segments. This explosion allows specific movements and layouts in larger spaces far more varied than that of single sofa pieces- giant and impassible. This explosion has embodied energy that trickles out to an energetic pulse in the surrounding air. One can imagine an alternate future of space, of interaction. We begin to envision agency in creating our personal landscapes. Norbert Elias talks about the difference between symbols and motives in “The Use of the Knife at the Table”- where the etiquette of the use of the knife as a tool reflects the symbol our current society establishes it to be- which also reflects a series of previous symbols it has existed as in the past. This palimpsest gathers speed and, the knife ends up being far from what it might have been emotionally accepted as upon its origins. This kind of evolution depicts human society- but also a gross misunderstanding of the typologies of objects we are surrounded with. It creates a ‘pacification of society’- “The [culinary] knife, by the nature of its social use, reflects changes of human personality, with its changing drives and wishes. It is an embodiment of historical situations and the structural regularities of society.”13 I believe by creating environments where we have the opportunities for viscerally experiencing our furniture, objects, and emotions- we may connect on a deeper level with our things. One way to do this is to change perspectives- both psychologically and physically. Perhaps a further schism with some archetypes of the past is in order.

“The Use of the Knife at the Table”
Flooring, 2017, Oak Flooring, Nails, Suede. Variable Dimensions
Flooring, 2017, Oak Flooring, Nails, Suede, Broom Corn. Variable Dimensions
The way we interact with things and other people in this world is the basis for experience, for human connection, in which furniture plays a gigantic role. In light of today’s sedentary culture, I believe it occurs to the fabricated environment to break the current paradigm and enhance not only our physical health, but our mental health, by creating more meaningful relationships—by connecting with each other, the objects we surround ourselves with, and the spaces we inhabit. Understanding by not just seeing material (visual v physical interpretations of things) but by interacting with it, experiencing it, finding significance through sentimental memory through touch, smell. The relationship here is symbiotic. Both architecture, furniture, objects, our interactions with space, as well as each other, lack a certain value; a certain emptiness that fills us with life. This emptiness, I think, must be directed towards an evolving social vernacular. We commonly only use a very small percentage of space— the horizontal floor plane. This enables a very limited spectrum of movement, commonly derived from furniture, not architecture. I believe that the two should not be mutually exclusive.
This cultural conditioning that we experience dulls our senses, and thus our ability to fully experience the world. It is perhaps useful to think of ourselves as beings that have had an extensive evolution of living and responding to nature outside being part of this phenomena we call ‘civilization’, as made evident by the Savannah Hypothesis. At this point it may be impossible to fully understand the extent of our physical capabilities- knowledge that has been lost to history because of the retardation of our physical selves. I feel as though the combination of our civilized selves with a more practiced and tuned re-discovery of out physical selves might create homeostasis.
Michael Benedikt astutely notes in a polemic of his that “It is always easier to identify problems than to solve them.”¹⁴ We train as designers to notice things that other’s don’t- to discover what is beneath the surface of the face of our society. I hope to make clear that this thesis is not much of a manifesto- but more of an attempts to begin to create work that starts to both formulate questions as much as it attempts to answer them, if not more. Thus far I have been able to cull out the following threads from both my work as well as the writing. From here I hope to continue making connections and discoveries over this lifelong pursuit and passion.

1. casualness- opportunity
2. specific to living spaces
3. nature is a generative example
4. break with archetypes
5. integrate construction politics with nature
6. overturn home as a stage- conditioned response
7. body language spectrum
8. poche- inhabit unused spaces
9. alertness/awareness
10. inversion of architectural elements into interior space

I am interested in an evolving social vernacular concerning the ways in which we use furniture beyond historically formal function or permitted aesthetics. I see the emerging casualness of interactions with furniture objects as an opportunity to understand and reinvigorate the conditioned way we respond to our living spaces. My interest in understanding the relationship between social mores and our furniture landscapes stems from my unique perspective as someone who has experienced spaces that I perceive as outliers to the automatic ways in which we furnish living spaces. These spaces exist interstitially between what we conceive of as natural and fabricated worlds. These spaces house a convergence of engagement in the natural world outside of the strict paradigm of urban living. Through observation, they demonstrate an epoch of nuances in human interactions freed from the totalitarianism of convention. My work attempts to evoke these nuanced characteristics through explorations in psychological and physical interactions with natural and manmade materials.

Our interiors have become stark residues of the impressive structures that permit them. Because of the efficacy and affordability of new building technologies, the human element of design has been compromised. These materials and forms that have become commonplace in American architecture are torturing the human psyche and have created a stoicism concerning our relation to the built form and the spaces we inhabit. No longer are we animals of this earth.

We have alienated ourselves from the soil that bore us. We must address these issues not by hindering our progress in engineering and technology but by more responsibly and ethically reacting to these structural forms. We must rethink the edges and planes that are currently acting as a cage for the extents of the human mind. We must be made more aware of our physical environment and not be afraid to be a part of it. By implementing a more plastic existence of our interior spaces that allows for more sentimental material and form integrated with structural elements, Biophobia will die.
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Image Index:

*all images that appear in this book were taken by the author.

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These images depict people, places, and objects that have inspired and impacted this thesis body of work.