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ANÁLISIS Y PROYECTOS  
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## ANALYSIS AND ADVANCED PROJECTS / ANÁLISIS Y PROYECTOS AVANZADOS

p. 1057-1067: **NATURE INSIDE. THE FIGURES OF THE TREE AND THE FOREST AS SYMBOLIC REFERENCES IN THE CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE ARCHITECTURE** / p. 1068-1079: **LA NATURALEZA INTERIOR. LAS FIGURAS DEL ÁRBOL Y EL BOSQUE COMO REFERENTES SIMBÓLICOS EN LA ARQUITECTURA JAPONESA CONTEMPORÁNEA**  
*López del Río, Alberto*

p. 1081-1088: **THE SATURATED WORLD OF CHARLES AND RAY EAMES: OBJECTS, ATMOSPHERE AND CELEBRATIONS** / p. 1089-1096: **EL MUNDO SATURADO DE CHARLES Y RAY EAMES: OBJETOS, AMBIENTES Y CELEBRACIONES**  
*Jódar Pérez, Ana Irene*

p. 1097-1103: **CARLO SCARPA: ABSTRACTION AS AN ARGUMENT OF THE SUBLIME. RESEARCH STRATEGY** / p. 1104-1111: **CARLO SCARPA: LA ABSTRACCIÓN COMO ARGUMENTO DE LO SUBLIME. ESTRATEGIA DE INVESTIGACIÓN**  
*Ros Campos, Andrés*

p. 1113-1123: **REM AT BOTH SIDES OF THE MIRROR** / p. 1124-1134: **REM A LOS DOS LADOS DEL ESPEJO**  
*Butragueño Díaz-Guerra, Belén*

p. 1135-1144: **DOMESTIC BIG DATA. CLUSTER TOOL FOR THE ANALYSIS, ASSESSMENT, DIAGNOSIS AND DESIGN OF THE CONTEMPORARY COLLECTIVE HOUSING IN DENSE CITY CENTRES** / p. 1145-1155: **DOMESTIC BIG DATA. CLUSTER TOOL PARA EL ANÁLISIS, EVALUACIÓN, DIAGNÓSTICO Y PROYECTO, DE LA VIVIENDA COLECTIVA CONTEMPORÁNEA EN LOS CENTROS DENSIFICADOS DE LA CIUDAD**  
*Sallago Zambrano, Borja*

p. 1157-1167: **ARCHITECT, WORK AND METHOD** / p. 1168-1179: **ARQUITECTO, OBRA Y MÉTODO**  
*Besa, Eneko*

p. 1181-1191: **A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE ARCHITECTURAL WORK OF MILTON BARRAGÁN** / p. 1192-1203: **ANÁLISIS CRÍTICO DE LA OBRA ARQUITECTÓNICA DE MILTON BARRAGÁN**  
*Casado López, Guillermo*

p. 1205-1216: **CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE AND ITS INTEGRATION WITH PATRIMONIAL ARCHITECTURE** / p. 1217-1228: **ARQUITECTURA CONTEMPORÁNEA Y SU INTEGRACIÓN CON EDIFICIOS PATRIMONIALES**  
*Martínez Gómez, Josué Nathan*

p. 1229-1240: **THE URBAN FORM IN MORELLA AS A HISTORIC LABORATORY IN THE 21ST CENTURY** / p. 1241-1251: **LA FORMA URBANA EN MORELLA COMO UN LABORATORIO HISTÓRICO EN EL SIGLO XXI**  
*Beltran Borràs, Júlia*

p. 1253-1263: **MODEL MANAGEMENT OF HABITABILITY IN PROTECTED WILD AREAS (ASP) CASE STUDY TORRES DEL PAINE NATIONAL PARK (PNTP), PATAGONIA CHILE** / p. 1264-1274: **MODELO DE HABITABILIDAD EN ÁREAS SILVESTRES PROTEGIDAS (ASP) CASO DE ESTUDIO PARQUE NACIONAL TORRES DEL PAINE (PNTP), PATAGONIA CHILENA**  
*Villanueva, Laura; Cuchi, Albert*

p. 1275-1282: **DWELLING. INVARIANTS IN CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE** / p. 1283-1290: **LA MORADA. INVARIANTES EN LA ARQUITECTURA CONTEMPORÁNEA**  
*Moreno Sánchez-Cañete, Francisco José; Martínez Díaz, Daniel; Bolívar Montesa, Carmen; Muñoz Carabias, Francisco*

p. 1291-1300: **THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE TRADITION. JUVENAL BARACCO AND THE RECOMPOSITION OF THE LOST CITY** / p. 1301-1311: **LA RECONSTRUCCIÓN DE LA TRADICIÓN. JUVENAL BARACCO Y LA RECOMPOSICIÓN DE LA CIUDAD PERDIDA**  
*Montestruque Bisso, Octavio*

p. 1313-1321: **FROM THE IMMEASURABLE TO THE MEASURABLE** / p. 1322-1331: **DE LO INCONMENSURABLE A LO MENSURABLE**  
*Delpino Sapeña, Rossana María.*

p. 1333-1343: **HIDDEN SPACE CARTOGRAPHY. ARCHITECTURAL EXPERIMENTATION LABORATORY** / p. 1344-1354: **CARTOGRAFÍAS DEL ESPACIO OCULTO. LABORATORIO DE EXPERIMENTACIÓN ARQUITECTÓNICA**  
*García García, Tomás ; Montero-Fernández, Francisco J.*

p. 1355-1364: **ARCHITECTURE & ENTROPY. TIME AND DESTRUCTION AS A CREATIVE SUBJECT** / p. 1365-1375: **ARQUITECTURA Y ENTROPÍA. TIEMPO Y DESTRUCCIÓN COMO GENERADORES DEL PROYECTO ARQUITECTÓNICO**  
*Blázquez Jesús, Pablo*

p. 1377-1381: **ARCHITECTONICAL LIMITS IN THE BIDIMENSIONAL WORK OF EDUARDO CHILLIDA** / p. 1382-1386: **LÍMITES ARQUITECTÓNICOS EN LA OBRA BIDIMENSIONAL DE EDUARDO CHILLIDA**  
*Dovale Carrión, Carmiña*

p. 1387-1396: **DISASSEMBLING DOMESTICITY. HABITING HETEROTOPIAS** / p. 1397-1406: **DESMONTANDO LA DOMESTICIDAD. HABITANDO LAS HETEROTOPIAS**  
*M-Millana, Elena*



# THE SATURATED WORLD OF CHARLES AND RAY EAMES: OBJECTS, ATMOSPHERE AND CELEBRATIONS

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**Abstract:** Known as Case Study House No. 8, the Eames House is considered one of the most iconic houses in the history of American modern architecture. Charles Eames (1907-1978) and Bernice Alexandra-Ray Kaiser (1912-1988) started designing the house in 1945 as part of the program promoted by the American magazine *Arts & Architecture* for the industrialization of homes called *Case Study Houses*. The final project was an example of modular, easy manufacture and assembly housing (the structure was built in just 90 hours), a unique example of how to solve housing needs in a modern, lucid and realistic way. Nonetheless, there is an excess of *colour, sensoriality, aesthetic elaboration and pleasure* in the interior of this container, in its content, that has little to do with the aesthetic principles supported by this generation of architects, which arose in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

This research means to bring light to this *saturated* side of the Eameses, to know the origin and sense of these practices (settled on their connection with the objects, atmosphere and celebrations/parties); so as to, ultimately, recognise the role that American pop culture from the 50s –in the first place– and the festive tradition –as a part of this post-war culture– played in the interior making of their interior personal imaginary.

**Keywords:** Eames, Saturation, Objects, Parties, Games.

## 1. Introduction

"I took this picture of Ray Eames at her table to document a breakfast visit I made to the famous house in the mid-80s. She had put a great deal of thought into the table setting, making her guests wait until she felt it was perfect. The activity seemed partly a performance for the guests' benefit, partly a ritual for the completion of the house itself. I don't remember what we ate, but I do have what I'm pretty sure is a false memory of eating with plates on our laps to avoid the clutter on the tabletop." (Wild, 1999).

Charles and Ray Eames practised what Beverly Gordon calls a *saturated* quality, a kind of aesthetic experience (state, reality), sensually full and rich. They created enchanted worlds through the elaboration of their day-to-day tasks and responsibilities making them special and transforming them into something magical, amusing and emotionally satisfactory.<sup>1</sup> The story behind these activities is quite attractive by itself, filled with suggestive images that stimulate our senses. The story is also, to a great extent, partly forgotten by the majority of existing publications which, coming from a pro-modernist stance, tended to highlight those aspects related to the use of new materials and technologies by the Eameses in contrast to other aspects of their work associated with decoration, fantasy, fragmentation and addition; which can be considered prototypically postmodern.

This research intends to articulate my ideas about this *enchanted* state or experience, deliberately practised by Charles and Ray Eames and which I call their *saturated world*. The aim of this paper might seem naïve because the distinctive features of the enchantment are simple in comparison to the complexities of the modern life, and because the principles of the enchantment are directly opposed to those of modernity. The enchantment is connected to the game –the *eros*, suspicious elements in an extremely ambitious culture, and it



Figure 1. Ray Eames sitting in front of a breakfast table. Picture taken by Lorraine Wild.

<sup>1</sup> "[Charles and Ray] transformed everything they touched into something magical", concludes one of their disciples in the documentary film 'Eames: The Architect and the Painter' (Dir. Jason Cohn & Bill Jersey, 2011). This coincides with the definition of domestic amusements used by B. Gordon (2006).

always implies an escape from logic, a valued tool in a society constructed over understanding (Moore, 1997). By means of trying to identify the underlying cultural suppositions behind this additive, fragmented, excessive and decorative aesthetic with its inter- and intracultural references that characterise the work of the Eameses, we can however bring to the table the development of an intellectual discourse, parallel to their professional practice, capable of providing some varied conclusions and opening new lines of research. We will do so by noticing Charles and Ray Eames in a way not seen before, freeing them from that scientific and less naïve aura attached to their work; maybe in black and white, in order to move forward through a colorist, costumbrist and visual study.

## 2. The saturated World of Charles and Ray Eames: a meaning

I decided to use this term for referring to the work of the Eameses (to those areas of their work distant to, and sometimes in opposition to, the modernism that encouraged reduction, suppression and dismissed *disorder*), because it perfectly describes what I mean to say. From the perspective of visual arts where saturation, regarding colour, is a synonym of *intensity* (intensity, colouring or purity of a certain tint), Beverly Gordon, author of *The Saturated World. Aesthetic Meaning, Intimate Objects, Women's Lives, 1890-1940*, says: "A saturated hue is at its brightest, most intense level and is in its purest form. Something that is saturated, be it color, water, or anything else, is in its most fully loaded or charged state; it has absorbed the ultimate amount of its medium. A "saturated world" is thus a full, rich one —sensually charged, bright, and intense. Everything in it seems extra-alive." (Gordon, 2006, p.2)

When someone enters Charles and Ray Eames' estate in Santa Monica, California, they are immediately invaded by a feeling of astonishment, delight and admiration. The things surrounding them seem imbued with a sense of magic. From the vegetation outside (rows of eucalyptus and geraniums) to the objects decorating the interior of the house (seashells, combs, candles, crafted figurines or Kachina dolls), everything turns out especially attractive, with vivid colours. Reflections come to live, they multiply and change constantly. The textures of the carpets and other fabrics covering the interior of the living room invite to touch, more than ever. You feel like, as poet Rainer Maria Rilke would say, "living in a poetical image"<sup>2</sup> (Fig.2). Other visitors before me have struggled to find words to describe the same state of consciousness. Professor Max Underwood describes it as entering a "tsunami of visual, sensual and emotional stimuli. (...) It was like walking into the circus big top on opening night or diving into the ocean teeming with a school of fish for the first time." (Underwood, 2006, p.58). German curator and collector Alexander von Vegesack, director of the Vitra Design Museum writes in 1990 about "being whisked into a world full of images from India, and at times into a circus" (von Vegesack, 1997, p.7). American historian and architecture critic Esther McCoy describes the contents of the Eames House as "*clusters of toys, of shells, of fine goods, and things which must have come from dream attics.*" (McCoy, 1988, Box 21 Folder 8). British architects Alison and Peter Smithson simply refer to the Eames House as "the home of magic" (Smithson, 2001).

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<sup>2</sup> Description based on my personal experience upon visiting the *Case Study House #8* (203 North Chautauqua Boulevard, Pacific Palisades, Santa Monica, California) in November, 2012.





Figura 2. Interior view of the Case Study House 8 (1945-1949).

In *The Saturated World. Aesthetic Meaning, Intimate Objects, Women's Lives, 1890-1940*, Beverly Gordon identifies a series of qualities interrelated to the saturated world. I proceed to discuss them due to their importance in understanding the rest of the exhibition. As the author points out, *aesthetic intensity* is a basic characteristic. It implies the stimulation of multiple senses: sound, smell, touch and taste are at least as important as sight. We find *embodiment* or *personification* as an attribute related to aesthetic intensity, where consciousness is connected to the body instead of the mind. Based on the theories of French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Poincy, Gordon argues that, in a saturated world, we think and sense with all our body, not only with the eyes and the brain: "It is impossible to know the world by disengaging ourselves from the body" (Gordon, 2006, p.21). A sincere or childlike wonder trait is also part of the saturated world, as well as a *playful, expressive and creative attitude*. There's also an *interconnection* and *community* value in the saturated activities described by Beverly Gordon; connection with other people, certainly, but also connection and even intimacy with objects. Gift relations predominate; objects are linked to human interactions and do not act as goods or wares. The process, in fact, is more important than the product: even when something in particular is being constructed, it is the creative experience what matters more than what has been created (Gordon, 2006, pp.15-34).

In the years following the Second World War, 1945-1960 (a period when the Eameses developed most of their production), American culture was characterised by an important degree of aesthetic saturation. The ending of the war and the subsequent abundance of consumer goods, plus the establishment of the so-called Welfare State motivated a type of sensorial excitement. Magazines filled their pages with ingenious campaigns selling everything, from ready-made food to firearms. The fiercest capitalism was being painted in colour and optimism through fresh and vibrant images showing a carefree brave new world.

Along with advertising, colour television started taking its first steps, making the spreading of deep-coloured images possible. Sensually rich pictorial images reached the more than 973 thousand homes that had a colour TV in 1960 daily. The period ensuing WWII was also regarded as the still latent legacy of a series of movements in the field of decorative arts (*Arts and Crafts*, "*Mexicana*" revivalism or *Native American Art*, among others). It gave rise to a massive production of saturated products like Marianne Strengel's (1909-1998) fabrics or Maija Grotell's (1899-1973) ceramic pieces.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> In this context, the *Cranbrook Academy of Arts* stands out, founded early in the 1930s by George Booth in Detroit, with Eliel Saarinen as a collaborator. Apart from fine arts, their activities included textiles (with Loja Saarinen in charge), ceramics, goldsmithing, architecture and design. In Cranbrook, new perspectives for young American architects opened up, influenced by Scandinavian design, and in particular by Alvar Aalto's work, reinforced by a renewed interest in the Arts & Crafts' movement ideas. The eternal dream of the 20<sup>th</sup> century of joining art and industry together predominates in this school. Renowned artists, architects and designers - such as the Saarinens, Ray and Charles Eames, Florencia Knoll, Jack Lenor Larsen, Donald Lipski, Duane Hanson, Lorena Wild, Nick Cave and Hani Rashid, to name a few- have been part of Cranbrook's artist community.

Although aesthetic consciousness might have made an impression in culture as a whole, it looked like a task specially tailored for women. They generally identified themselves with some kind of sensibility and inherent aesthetic taste. Discourses of the time maintained that women's education was designed to bring to light that natural tenderness and sensibility and, although some took formal classes, especially in the fields of decorative arts and home economics, aesthetic training disseminated mainly through informal channels, primarily through women's magazines.<sup>4</sup>

Publications like *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Housekeeping Monthly* or *Betty Crocker's Picture Cook Book* encouraged women to cultivate the saturated characteristics in their domestic and leisure activities. By holding parties, for example, they would not only be capable of "making friends, giving your children happy memories, solidifying social position (...) and filling a half-spoken promise made to your husband when you married him that "life with me is going to be fun" (Daly, 1950, p.ix). They had the opportunity of "satisfying [your] own instincts as a homemaker and creative woman" *creating* magical surroundings, coordinating and carefully planning each of the elements so as to maximise all the attendants' sensual stimulation. According to the instructions compiled by Maureen Daly in *The Perfect Hostess* (1950), the person who, for example, hosted a Valentine's Party in the United States would fill her table with layers of red cellophane and lace tablecloths, and would place a centrepiece made of red carnations (in a shade similar to the rest of the reds present in the table), all flanked by red candles in crystal candlesticks. She would encourage her guests to put on a costume. "If most of the couples attending the party are married, invite them to come "just as they were dressed the night of the great proposal"; (...) if the guests are unmarried, simply ask them to come garbed as any pair of great lovers history". She would then serve snacks including cold, pink punch with tiny flowers as part of the heart theme. The hostess would also entertain her guests with fun and simple charades about "great-lovers" (Daly, 1950, pp.93-97).

Although most certainly not many homes would carry out the celebration in the way Daly described, this event had all the features B. Gordon cites in her description of the *saturated world*. It was a performance for the senses. The flowers perfumed the atmosphere, and the punch smelled and tasted like flowers. It was an "embodiment" event, not only because of that emphasis on sensual experience, but also because the participants were themselves an element of the set, dressed up like a part of the surroundings, and interacting physically with it. An enjoyable and amazing event, it was designed for creating a feeling of happy surprise. By making all the elements play with the theme of colour red helped transform them, making them special; even something as quotidian as a lace tablecloth could be seen through other eyes when placed over red cellophane.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The fact that certain aesthetic abilities were associated with women is partly based on the determinist philosophies from the 18<sup>th</sup> century (see Messmer-Davidow, E. (1989), 'For Softness She: Gender, Ideology and Aesthetics in Eighteenth Century England' in F. Keener y S. Lorch (Eds.), *Eighteenth century women and the Arts*, New York: Greenwood Press, pp.47-50). These were centred on considerations supposing each genre had innately different talents. This focus on gender, promoted and taught in the school as well as print media, meant that, from the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, any visual consciousness developed by women was channelled towards their homes.

<sup>5</sup> Attention should be drawn to the important similarity between the parties or celebrations that books like Maureen Daly's invited to hold in the American homes during the 50s, and some examples described by B. Gordon in her book *The Saturated World* (women's domestic amusements from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century).



Similar parties and entertainments were usually held inside of the *Case Study House #8*. In this more private circle Charles and Ray felt free involving themselves in aesthetic elaboration, embracing what was sensual, and being fun. These parties helped combine the spheres of work and play; the activities implied work, but they were simultaneously entertaining. Sometimes, these parties were huge performances. Figure 3 shows a night at the Eames House in 1951, when Charles and Ray Eames welcomed Isamu Noguchi (then a designer for Herman Miller), silent-film star Charles Chaplin and Shirley Yamaguchi (film star and Noguchi's fiancée) as guests, among others. That night, master of tea Miss Matsumoto, and student Shirley Yamaguchi, dressed in traditional kimonos and sitting in a *seiza* position, demonstrated a tea ceremony under the watchful eyes of the attendees. The surroundings were decorated for that purpose. The usual furniture of the house had been moved away in order to leave place for a harmonious composition of tatamis, wire base tables (personally designed by Charles for each guest) and cushions. Just like the previous example, this experience designed by the Eames set up a pleasure for the senses. A show where sight, smell and taste got equally involved. A sensual and aesthetic show where the guests became a necessary and active part in the performance.



Figure 3. A Japanese-style tea ceremony at the Eames House in Pacific Palisades, California, 1951. Some of the guests, from left to right, Charles Eames; Shirley Yamaguchi; Charlie Chaplin, and Ray Eames (detrás de Chaplin).

In other more intimate celebrations, the event was reduced to a simple lunch in the garden or a dinner for four people in the kitchen of the Eames house (Figures 4 and 5). In both cases, the performance (materialised in a perfectly orchestrated table by the hosts) left no one indifferent. One scene from the documentary *Eames: the Architect and the Painter*, Prizker prize winner architect Kevin Roche recalls a dinner in the Eames house. Instead of sweets at the end of the meal, Ray offered their guests small bowls of beautifully arranged flowers, displayed for their visual pleasure and, maybe, even olfactory. In his account of the dinner, Roche remembers his distraction, but, no doubt about it, for the hosts this dessert was a real banquet for the senses.



Figure 4. Table setting at the kitchen of the Eames House.

Entertainments like these are objects of study in the first part of the research, addressing them as a type of domestic entertainment in which the saturated experience was deliberately practised by the Eameses. The rest of the research explores different aspects of the Eameses' work that, in its entirety, provide a global vision of the saturated world Charles and Ray *constructed* for more than three decades.

*Functional decoration* as a concept (an expression invented by the Eameses for describing their decorative objects compositions) constitutes the contents of the second part of the research. Charles and Ray played at creating enchanted worlds in their films, exhibitions and, almost literally, in their house in Santa Monica, collecting and assembling strange or apparently disparate objects in space (Fig. 6). These compositions of "surprisingly juxtaposed articles of cultural, material and visual diversity that differed in scale, size, color, texture, type, age, materials and



Figure 5. Frame of the film "House: After Five Years of Living (1955).

monetary value, among other things” (Attfield & Kirkham, 1995, p.172) would form a feast for the senses and imagination; they were normally used with an important display of colour, texture and prints, with a cheerful attention to the smallest details.<sup>6</sup>

These compositions, as the Eameses point out, were a clear expression of their own personalities and their understanding of design, beauty and quality, though its main appeal resided in the chance it gave for aesthetic expression and elaboration.<sup>7</sup> Fit for a paper doll house (scrapbook), these intimate worlds helped reinforce the feeling of connection to the objects and served as corporeal manifestations of an imagined inner world.<sup>8</sup>

The last chapter explores the relationship Charles and Ray had with objects, sometimes categorized in the context of compositions (*functional decorations*) abovementioned. The Eameses felt especially attracted to domestic and everyday objects -usually they gathered useful articles like dinnerware pieces, combs, buttons, thimbles, etc.; short-lived objects (bits of paper like flyers, wrappers, tags); or more complex detailed or textured items like popular crafts or exotic fabrics. Interest in those objects certainly comes from their academic training, but furthermore, for our understanding of the saturated world, those articles were intimate and personal.<sup>9</sup> Not only were many of the items related to the body (masks, combs, thimbles, fabrics, finely-embroidered saris...), but also the couple was generally interested in the people associated to those items. Unlike the masculine way of collecting prevailing since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Charles and Ray usually showed a personal interest in the people responsible for their manufacturing or their previous owners. A quick look at the objects gathered by the Eameses shows that many of them were gifts from their friends (a mobile from Calder, a painting from Hoffman), personal souvenirs (a desert rose root picked up during their honeymoon, Ray's 'bits of paper) or popular crafts.

Their approach also differed from the traditional masculine way of collecting because they were generally less interested in trophies and the fact of completing a series. They were rather concerned about the process or the trip (in many occasions Charles and Ray referred to their trips to coastal areas or the desert with their sleeping bags in pursuit of herbs, rocks or trunks whose appearance they wanted to study) and the inherent value of the object (either as a *tableau* or diorama, or as a tool for explaining an idea). They established a private form of intimacy with the objects.<sup>10</sup>

## 2. Conclusion preview

Even though a large proportion of the existing literature about the Eameses comes from a pro-modern position and they reveal a tendency or inclination towards new materials or avant-garde technology at the expense of aesthetic and so forth, some of the first observations regarding the aspects of the

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<sup>6</sup> Much has been said about the aesthetics of Ray's *collecting and display*. For her, each object meant something, the arrangement was crucial and the movement was mandatory (meaning that the object did not have to stay in the same place, so it would move from a shelf to the table or from the office to the house). Esther McCoy, in a remembrance written for *L.A. Architect* after Ray's passing in October 1988 notes: "Grouped on tables, classified and lined up precisely in cabinets, declassified and injected into a setting, they were all in movement. That was the thing about Ray, the infinite number of variations that sprang from those square-fingered hands".

<sup>7</sup> In 1982, a young lady asked Ray: "Mrs. Eames, how did it feel to give up painting?" She replied "I never gave up painting, I just changed my palette". Similarly, Pat Kirkham has sometimes referred to these compositions as *tableaus* or *dioramas*. In both cases, these terms are closely related to pictorial discipline.

<sup>8</sup> *Paper doll houses* were collage albums presumably manufactured as homes for paper dolls during 1890-1940. Women and girls from the United States spent countless hours searching, cutting and sticking clippings in these scrapbooks creating imaginary scenes filled with detail. "There I stood- dumbstruck and greedy in front of [pages taken from scrapbook albums (paper doll houses)]. The collages had cast their spell. Their array of domestic and decorative detail was dizzying, while their flirtation with scale, space, texture and pattern was disarmingly picturesque.... As an ensemble [they were] tantalizing... They pointed to a scissor-happy, scissor-sure marriage between hand and imagination". Linda Roscoe Hartigan, *The House that Collage built*. Cited by B. Gordon, 2006, p.37.

<sup>9</sup> See "Functioning Decoration" chapter in Kirkham, P. (1995). *Charles and Ray Eames: Designers of the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: The MIT University Press Group, pp.143-200.

<sup>10</sup> Between 1890 and 1960 the accepted way of collecting in the United States responds to the masculine prototype of collector. As B. Gordon points out, an opposing activity regarding the feminine gender can be identified. As it will be developed in our research, the Eameses rejected being considered as *collectors*, because their way of relating to the objects differs from this masculine way of collecting.



Eameses' work that are related to decoration or fantasy came from the contributions of Alison and Peter Smithson in a special issue of British magazine *Architectural Design* (September, 1966). In his essay "*Just a few chairs and a house: An essay on the Eames-aesthetic*", Peter Smithson focuses the attention on the way the Eameses had bent the aesthetic rules of modernity and describes how:

"In the 1950s, the Eameses [sic] moved design away from the machine aesthetics and bicycle technology, on which it had lived since the 1920s, into the world of the cinema-eye and the technology of the production of airplanes; from the world of the painters into the world of layout-men" (Smithson, 1966a, p.443)

The first approaches to the Eames aesthetic are pointed to a groundbreaking interpretation, a dramatic and no turning back shift compared to the previous model. The new aesthetic embraced the myth of a redeeming and bearer of happiness technology, firmly committed to the cause of design and industrial production of everyday objects, but "with the extravagance of the new folk purchase: fresh, pretty, colourful ephemeral" (Smithson, 1966b, p.448). It was like "an art form of ordinary life and ordinary objects seen with an eye that sees the ordinary as also magical" (Smithson, 1966c, p.443).

Just like the Smithsons, architect and postmodern theorist Robert Venturi also referred in the 1960s to the importance of all the objects gathered indoors and on display by the Eameses -from stones, combs, candles, starfish and wooden trunks to toys, souvenirs, Mexican piñatas, Christmas decor and flowers. Robert Venturi acknowledged the Eameses' interior work, as it escaped from definitions of orthodox modernity, and reintroducing a density of detail in architectonic interiors not seen since the Victorian era:

"It gave me great pleasure," wrote Robert Venturi, "that the Eameses reintroduced good old Victorian muddle in their home. The architecture of modernism always wanted everything to be clean and orderly and then along came these two, spreading their eclectic assemblages all over the entire interior."(McCoy, 1973, p.67)

While Alison and Peter Smithson did not hesitate to describe the Eames aesthetic as a "message of hope from another planet" (Smithson, 1966b, p.448), Venturi depicts the work of the Eameses as the product of a certain time and certain artistic and cultural values, rather than a novel style or vocabulary created by individual *geniuses* without historical roots.

It is important to understand that, nonetheless, far from the Victorian era, in a nearer context (1945-1960), American culture lived a period of high aesthetic saturation. The United States was a witness of a growing democratization in the field of domestic entertainments. Some of the ideas for giving parties or entertainments that could have been limited to upper social classes by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century or the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were now available to large segments of population.

From the identification of this context (Festive, American and Domestic) from which, in the judgement of this research, it is necessary to approximate to the work of Charles and Ray Eames, to their personal imaginary of 'objects, atmosphere and celebrations'.

Therefore, with this research we expect to:

- Understand the duality that builds the Eames House ('container' and 'content').
- Identify the *saturation* in the work of the Eameses, not as something new and post-modern, but as an originally American heritage, linked to playfulness. This would support Peter Smithson's statements describing the Eames House as a "completely American" building (Smithson, 1991).
- Appreciate the contribution of the Eameses, what they did and nobody had done until then was taking this saturation from the domestic Sphere (private, *background*) where it usually was since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century through the domestic feminine entertainments; to the public Sphere (their work, *foreground*) through their designs, exhibitions and films.
- Acknowledge this feature in the work of the Eameses as the key to their success: a key to the popularity and approval of their works in the USA (as opposed to the response other modernist architects from Europe received in the United States).

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