

Elsie de Wolfe: The Birth of Modern Interior Decoration

Penny Sparke, edited by Mitchell Owens. Acanthus Press, 2005. 374 pp., 300 duotone illus. \$85/£50 Cloth. ISBN 0-926494-27-9.

Extending across more than three decades, Professor Penny Sparke's oeuvre has defined as well as reflected the changing preoccupations of Design History. Her work extends from the introductory texts so useful for identifying areas for further research, teaching and recruiting a general readership, such as *An Introduction to Design and Culture 1900 to the Present* (1986, 2004), *A Century of Design: Design Pioneers of the 20th Century* (1998), *Design in Context* (1987) and *The Design Source Book* (1986, 1992), to materials and typological studies, *The Plastics Age* (1990, 1993) and *A Century of Car Design* (2002), national surveys *Japanese Design* (1987) and *Italian Design: 1870 to the Present* (1988), and designer-led analyses, *Ettore Sottsass Jnr* (1982) and *Consultant Design: the history and practice of the designer in industry* (1983). In the last decade, Sparke has made a particular contribution to the literature of gender and design with *As Long As Its Pink: the Sexual Politics of Taste* (1995) and as an editor and contributor to *Women's Places: Architecture and Design 1860-1960* (2003) - for which Sparke contributed the essay 'Elsie de Wolfe and her Female Clients, 1905-1915: Gender, Class and the Professional Interior Decorator'. In addition to Sparke's contribution to *Interior Design and Identity* (2004), 'The Domestic Interior and the Construction of Self: the New York Homes of Elsie de Wolfe', *Journal* readers will remember her article 'The "ideal" and the "real" interior in Elsie de Wolfe's *The House in Good Taste* of 1913' (vol. 16, 2003). This latter group of writings set the scene for *Elsie de Wolfe: The Birth of Modern Interior Decoration*, by providing a context for its core intersecting themes of gender and modernism and more directly in the form of early portions of the text.

Elsie de Wolfe sits within current concern for the domestic interior and is a welcome addition to the literature, contributing as it does a substantial analysis of the career of an early woman practitioner. This recent trend means that it is becoming less accurate to assert, as editor Mitchell Owens does in the opening to his foreword for Sparke's book, that 'Interior decoration, unlike architecture, is a medium that has failed to be respectfully examined by many scholars and historians.' (p. 9) Nevertheless, it is good to know that *Elsie de Wolfe* is the first of a series of studies of interior designers to be published by Acanthus Press under Owens's editorship: forthcoming titles include his own study of Ruby Ross Wood and *Syrie Maugham* by Pauline Metcalf. If these later titles adopt the same plan as the first in the series, they will be significant interventions in the history of interior design. The seriousness of the endeavour is exemplified by the large clothbound hardback

format, with extensive text, supported by solid apparatus comprising catalogue raisonné, endnotes, bibliography and index, and a generous number of illustrations: *Elsie de Wolfe* has almost 300 duotones, of which many are beautifully reproduced. For *Elsie de Wolfe*, Sparke has followed Owens's pattern for the series, with the chapters chronologically arranged according to de Wolfe's successive jobs, including a large number of projects for her own dwellings. This effectively walks the reader through the development of de Wolfe's career, showing the similarities between various jobs as well as their differences. In fact, this book is everything one would expect from a definitive study, even if the editor insists 'These will not be definitive studies. Documentation continues to surface...' (p. 10) and Sparke herself admits 'This [...] is not the last word on de Wolfe's career. Details of other projects will continue to emerge as her contribution to the modern domestic interior is increasingly understood and her oeuvre receives greater scholarly attention.' (p. 17)

An early commission, Brooks Hall (1907) is interesting as an early example of a non-elite commission for de Wolfe but, in the main, the decorator built her career on servicing wealthy clients. Sparke emphasises the relevance of de Wolfe's early occupation as an actress and in 'elevating herself from parvenu to posh in barely a decade, she was in the perfect position to understand the dreams and requirements of newly minted hostesses.' (pp. 67-8). At the same time, Sparke describes de Wolfe as 'ever anxious to bring the rarefied world of decoration down to the less privileged masses and conscious of her role as a professional with sound ideas as well as decorative conceits' (p. 75). She did this through her journalism for *Good Housekeeping* and her book, *The House in Good Taste* (1913) as well as through her more inclusive commissions. However, her greatest talent was as a society decorator. The suite of rooms supplied in place of a multi-purpose bedroom for Anne Morgan exemplifies both 'the feminine ideal that de Wolfe wanted all women to be able to achieve in their own homes' and the considerable wealth required to achieve it. (p. 116) De Wolfe's biography also displays many symptoms mismatched with her desire to cater for the masses: her enthusiasm for Versailles, which informed her decision to live next to it in the Villa Trianon as well as the Francophilia of her designs, her entry onto the 'lowest rung' of the British aristocracy through marriage to Sir Charles Mendl (p. 253), and her personal and professional association with the Duke and Duchess of Windsor.

The book provides a wealth of detail to inform a core, underlying theme of the intersection of modern design and gender issues. De Wolfe's aesthetic was first articulated in the house she shared with Elizabeth Marbury on a corner of New York's East 117th Street. The photographs are well chosen to support Sparke's account of de Wolfe's achievements in this space; the dining room is depicted before redecoration, after the redecoration of 1896 and following further changes in the

early 1900s. De Wolfe's contribution is shown to reside in a preference for a simpler, more coherent and less cluttered approach to decorating: she painted doors and panelling white, replaced dark dining chairs with white ones, hung mirrors where displays of china and paintings had been and unified the floor covering. Aside from her own home, two of de Wolfe's early commissions were women's places - the Colony Club and Brooks Hall. Although her oeuvre included commissions for family homes and public spaces, and a notable apartment for Condé Nast, de Wolfe developed her aesthetic largely through designing for women: 'I am specially good at detail and the fitting up and the *comfort* of women's rooms, the intimate little tricks that no mere man, no matter how clever he may be, can ever know.' (p. 169) The importance of ornament in de Wolfe's interiors cannot be overstated. For example in Anne Vanderbilt's house (1921), de Wolfe commissioned Allyn Cox to paint trompe-l'oeils on the staircase, which were praised by decorator Nancy McClelland as 'simili-architecture' - here then the ornament subordinates, or becomes, the building itself. (p. 207) De Wolfe's modernism depended on simplification and bringing light to interiors through choosing white and pale colours, what Sparke terms an 'airier attitude'. (p. 185) The extent to which her work may be described as modern, however, is compromised by its historicism. Little of de Wolfe's work illustrates a break with the past - on the contrary, this proto-postmodernist treated styles of the past as a dressing up box to be plundered at will. De Wolfe lived in France, her home was the 'Paris branch', and a hybrid of French styles appeared as a signature aesthetic throughout her oeuvre, although animal skins and contemporary murals increasingly characterised her later work. De Wolfe's mixture of Louis this and that - a general 'Francophile aesthetic' (p. 109) - appealed to the self-made elite, for whom de Wolfe worked, as a mode of communicating success, wealth, educated taste and the niceties of life as well as 'dynastic gloss'. (p. 247) While Sparke is keen to emphasise de Wolfe's practicality, as did the decorator herself - the convenient notepad and pen in the hall (p. 92), the bedside table (p. 33), the desk/jardinière (p. 75) - her work is as ornamental as it is utilitarian. De Wolfe's 1910 show house at New York's 131 East 71st Street was developed as a business scheme to promote further similar commissions, but as Sparke points out:

...its décor depended on de Wolfe's emotional engagement. Presented to the public as a smart solution to an architectural problem, it also was an idealized, romantic home, a feminine fantasy wrapped within in a hard-nosed reconstruction project. (p. 89)

The book shows the complexity of de Wolfe's engagement with a modern aesthetic and a gendered one. While de Wolfe's reputation is such that she will be accorded further attention by historians of interior design and be praised for her achievements in the field, her aesthetic jars today. And that, I suspect, is at the root of Sparke's interest in de Wolfe. Not only is de Wolfe of interest as an early female interior decorator but also her work is highly decorative and, through its influence, responsible for a great deal of the less impressive domestic frippery that followed in the first half of

the twentieth century and which formed the subject for Sparke's gender analysis *As Long As It's Pink*.

The only flaw in this otherwise brilliant gem of a book is the tendency to assert de Wolfe's contribution in superlative terms, as on the flyleaf:

Decorating legend Else de Wolfe revolutionised interior design at the beginning of the 20th century by boldly sweeping out the darkness of Victorian clutter to usher in the warm light, soft luxury, and connoisseurship we now consider essential qualities of modern interior design.

What is missing here is the crowd of other people who contributed to the 'revolution', if such it was. Both the book's subtitle and the foreword (p. 9) position de Wolfe as mother of the entire industry - the procreation trope is not well suited to what was in fact a collective effort. It is true, as Sparke asserts in the first words of her book, that 'Elsie de Wolfe is a 20th-century legend' (p. 11) and this book functions partly as a biography of that legend. De Wolfe's celebrity was such that even her efforts in decorating J. Pierpoint Morgan's box at the opera using red brocade and gold trim on walls and seating, was reported in a newspaper. (p. 57). While scholarly fine judgments characterise this book, occasionally Sparke seem to believe the hype, or at least to promulgate it:

With enviable precision, she was able to walk through a room or set of rooms and suggest an aesthetic ensemble that would suit the taste and lifestyle of the client in question. (p. 21)

Sparke refers to the autobiography of de Wolfe's companion, Elizabeth Marbury, to support this point. While Marbury's honesty about de Wolfe's limitations as an actress was rooted in expertise as a theatrical manager, her qualifications in assessing de Wolfe's skill in interior decoration are less clear and it is not unreasonable to imagine that companionable fondness informed such judgment. Later, Sparke describes how 'Even though de Wolfe was in her mid-60s, she easily revitalized her stylistic vocabulary and, once again, created an interior aesthetic that the world was keen to emulate' (p. 258) and later still refers to the decorator's 'uncanny ability to conjure innovative, influential interiors, even into her 80s'. (p. 279).

The pressures of the marketplace, channelled through editors and publishers, impinge upon authors. The enormous popularity and marketability of biography can sometimes produce hagiography, and authors can be tempted to aggrandise their subjects by asserting that they achieved single-handedly what common sense tells us was a collective effort. That does not happen in this book, and the few unqualified phrases cited above are uncharacteristic of its careful delineations of the development of a group of highly influential interiors. *Elsie de Wolfe* is an excellent example of scholarship that is as attentive to the richly creative associations *between* people as it is to individual talent. Evidently,

understanding of the experiences and thus motivations of an individual practitioner is valuable, as is assessing the significance of their work by comparison with others. Here, each job is described in terms of the range of personnel involved and the detail offered is richly absorbing. When well-executed, as in this case, biographical studies are a prime format for the exploration of creative networks and chains of influence. Sparke supplies this in her careful account of the mutually beneficial and multi-layered relationship between de Wolfe and Marbury, and she sketches further fruitful associations with practitioners such as Ogden Codman and, of course, her clients. Without a doubt, Sparke has made another welcome, necessary, important, instructive and enjoyably absorbing contribution to the Design History and more particularly to the history of interior design.

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