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LIVING IMAGES: CHARLES AND RAY EAMES “AT HOME”

Rachel Stevenson

CHARLES AND RAY EAMES SIT IN THE LIVING ROOM OF THEIR OWN HOUSE IN PACIFIC PALISADES, LOS ANGELES (FIG. 1). THEY ARE TWO OF THE BEST-KNOWN DESIGNERS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY IN A HOUSE THAT “CHANGED THE WAY GENERATIONS OF ARCHITECTS AND DESIGNERS WOULD THINK AND LOOK.”¹ TAKEN IN 1958, NINE YEARS AFTER THE HOUSE—CASE STUDY HOUSE #8—WAS BUILT, THE PHOTOGRAPH WAS COMMISSIONED FOR *LIFE* MAGAZINE, CONFIRMATION IN ITSELF THAT THE HOUSE AND THE EAMESSES WERE FAMOUS.

Yet, as an image of architectural fame, it is an unusual one. The heroic figures of architectural modernism do not usually sit relaxed and cross-legged on the floor of their buildings. They tend to stand removed, outside or even hovering godlike above, as we see Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in the iconic photograph of him with a scale model of the Illinois Institute of Technology’s Crown Hall (Fig. 2).

This is an extreme example of an image of a famous architect, but it is one that we recognize: the Howard Roark character of Ayn Rand’s *The Fountainhead*, the autonomous, heroic artist who creates his masterpieces in isolation, the larger-than-life figure toward whom an awed admiration seems to be the demanded response.

The response invited by the photograph of Charles and Ray Eames is very different. It is not that the figures are any less identified with what they have created. It is more a matter of the relationships implied by these images, relationships between the architects and what they have made and with the audience they are addressing. In this respect, the fame surrounding the Eameses emerges as very different from that of their contemporaries, of whom Mies stands as a striking but by no means sole example. It is the nature of this difference, apparent after a first glance at the photographs, that I would like to consider.

The fame of the Eames House must surely be in part a product of the circumstances in which it was conceived. In 1945, *Arts & Architecture* magazine instigated the Case Study House program, ostensibly an attempt to find solutions to the problem of mass housing after World War II. But it was also a vehicle for John



Fig. 1 Charles and Ray Eames in the living room of Case Study House #8 1958

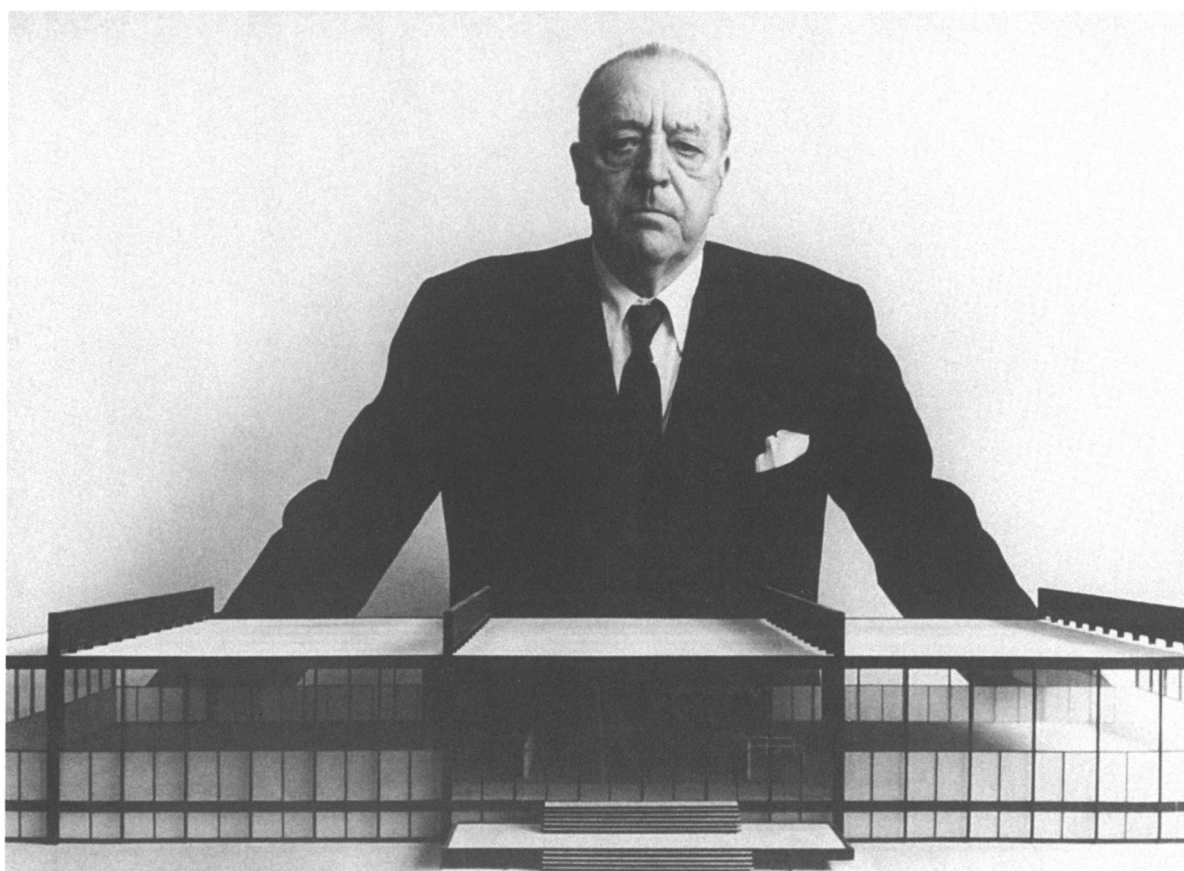


Fig. 2 Mies van der Rohe with a scale model of Crown Hall 1955

Entenza, the editor, to promote modernism to the public. This was the clear and overriding aim of the magazine, in architecture and in all the arts, and the Case Study House program gave Entenza the scale if sufficient interest could be stimulated at the outset. Realistically, the magazine could be more widely distributed than the houses could be visited. It was the magazine's task to capture the public's interest through the medium of photographic images. This is taken very much for granted today but was a less widely used practice in the field at that time.

It is key that the products in this practice were the images of the houses. Fame is produced by society; it cannot exist without an audience. Yet fame is not a relationship of personal acquaintance; it is a relationship that depends on images, not factual events or physical occurrences but constructed ones. It does not matter that the program itself was considered a failure; it had not delivered a solution to low-cost family housing after the war. Indeed, it only produced a number of not-so-cheap, one-off houses for individual clients. Most of the ideas incorporated in the designs did not get taken on by mainstream developers and, looking at the enormous amount of unimaginative, off-the-shelf speculative

housing that is being built now in the ever-extending suburbs of greater Los Angeles, it is easy to see why the Case Study proponents might despair of its impact. But despite this, more than fifty years on, the enduring power and popularity of the images of these houses is striking, their initial impact being echoed through subsequent waves of renewed interest in recent years, with some houses even attaining iconic status.²

With the Case Study House program, architecture was brought to life by images. Some of the houses were built and some remained as drawn proposals, but the program was hugely influential, far beyond its immediate intended audience. Writing in the book accompanying the 1989 exhibition of the houses at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, Reyner Banham traces the influence the Case Study Houses were to have and links them with the later British "High Tech" style of Norman Foster, Richard Rogers, and Michael Hopkins.³ This connection can be seen both in the construction techniques of steel and glass and, with their early houses, in the approach to living, which was perhaps closer to the program's original intentions. In charting this influence, Banham points to the way the images made their way across the Atlan-

tic, describing how *Arts & Architecture* turned up as a source book in many London offices, its impact being multiplied by other periodicals and then by teachers spreading the word throughout architectural schools in the 1950s and 1960s. But, as he also points out,

*In the beginning the Case Study House program was overwhelmingly Charles and Ray Eames in foreign perceptions—and was to remain so in many eyes until long after the program had come to an end.*⁴

His words—"the Case Study House program was overwhelmingly Charles and Ray Eames"—are very telling in that they place an emphasis on the people, not the house.

Indeed, when we look at the *Life* photograph, there they are at the center of the shot. Taken by the renowned architectural photographer Julius Shulman, it shows Charles and Ray Eames surrounded by their belongings: furniture, rugs, throws, plants, toys, and objects collected from their travels around the world. It is a living image of the house taken, in Shulman's words, "after Ray had gussied it up a little."⁵ Looking at the photograph, it is difficult to know quite what one is supposed to focus on. Although the couple sits in the



Fig. 3 Living room of Case Study House #8 1950

center of the frame, it doesn't read as a portrait of them with the house as background. Nor is it what we would recognize as a typical architectural shot, showing us the house, for our eyes are immediately drawn to its inhabitants and its contents. Shulman himself warns that

*models should be used with great care in architectural photography: The architectural design is the important element of the photograph; disturbing, outdated fashions and overpowering human forms are merely distracting and have no importance. Therefore, placement should be based on normal scale and for demonstration of architectural elements.*⁶

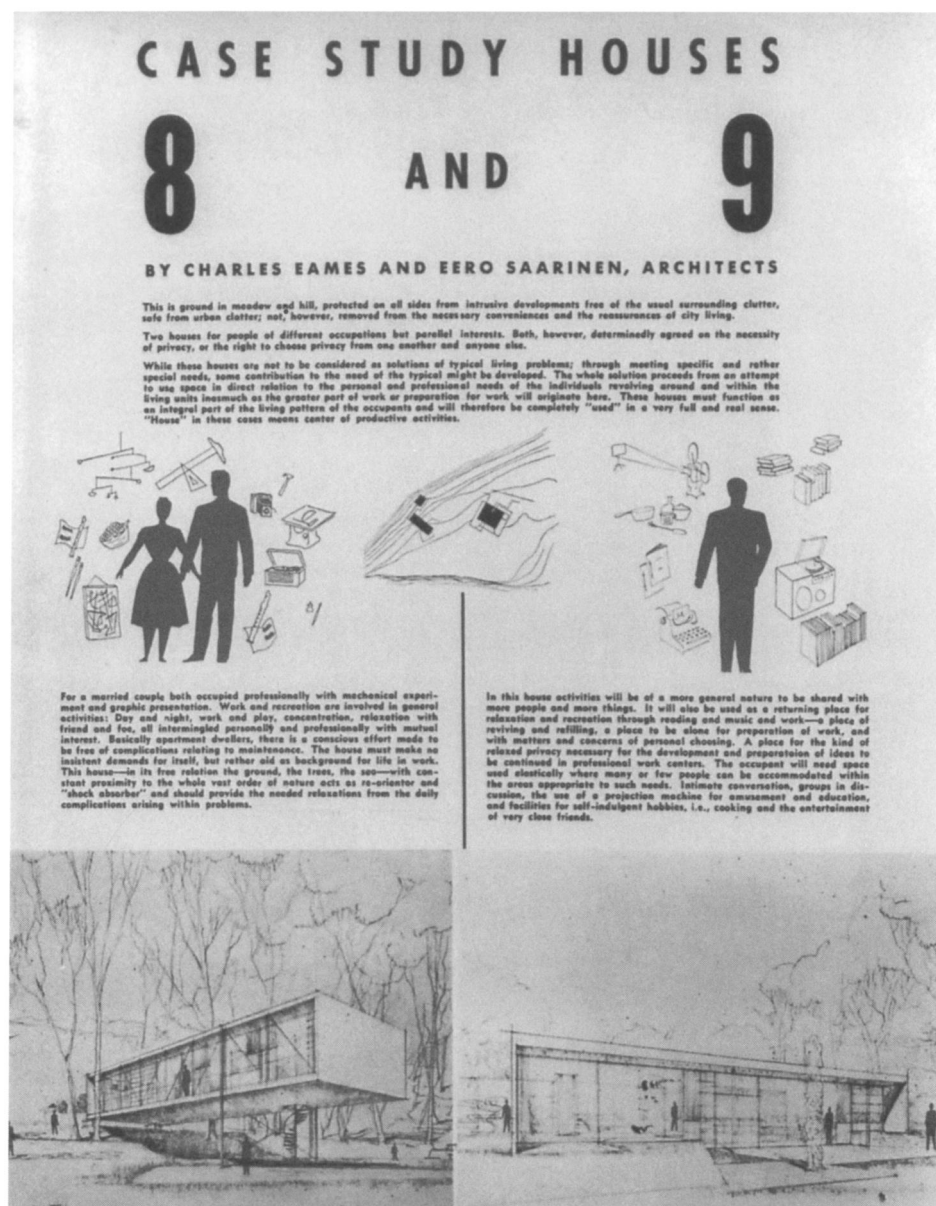
In this photograph, the presence of Charles and Ray Eames is clearly compelling, but it is

not distracting. In fact, they seem essential to the shot. Their image becomes caught up with that of the house, and it becomes difficult to separate the image of the house from the image of its inhabitants. The house is neither a backdrop nor a formal work of art. The Eameses' presence demonstrates how it is a living, inhabited home and invites the viewer to project themselves "at home," too.

It is perhaps surprising, when one considers that most buildings are inhabited, that we do not often see architecture represented in this way. Jonathan Hill puts this down to the desire of the architectural profession to present its work as an art form and suggests that architectural photographs are often purposely set up like architectural drawings, without signs of life, but instead present buildings as objects of art. He believes this is

a deep-rooted, conscious act by architects to elevate their status to that of the artist.⁷ Shulman himself says that when photographing a house, he would generally take two sets of photographs: one in color with people for the popular press, and another black-and-white set for architectural publications, without occupants or belongings and very little in the way of furniture save for a few carefully placed items.⁸ An earlier black-and-white shot of the Eames House (Fig. 3) shows how the emphasis is on the representation of detail, rather than on the inhabitation or inhabitants.

Within this split between the popular and more technical representations of architecture lies the assumption that the occupants are somehow additional to the architecture, at least in the eyes of architects. Shulman's photograph of the Eameses suggests a different approach. He is unusual as an architectural photographer in that, despite his own warnings, he frequently uses people in his images to create interest for a popular audience and to communicate the message that modern architecture is indeed comfortable and livable. This was the message of the Case Study House program, and this tactic of emphasizing the occupant was used throughout in the presentation of drawings and even

Fig. 4 *Arts & Architecture* December 1945

stories of fictional Case Study home-owners. For instance, in the December 1945 issue of *Arts & Architecture*, where the Eames House was first introduced together with its next-door neighbor, Case Study House (CSH) #9, designed by Charles Eames and Eero Saarinen for John Entenza, the unmistakable figures of Charles and Ray Eames appear as silhouettes on a drawing surrounded by the ephemera of their lives and their work.

In this first appearance of the house (Fig. 4), it is the users, Charles and Ray Eames (and Entenza for CSH #9), that are presented along with their interests and requirements as the generators for the design. As in the later photograph (Fig. 1), this image, too, firmly places the occupants and their daily lives within the architecture.

It is a method of "selling" the architecture to the public and one that Shulman, the Case Study House program, and the Eameses themselves all employed, somehow seeming to straddle the gap between the artistic and the everyday. With the program, *Arts & Architecture* embraced consumerism, using the houses to showcase building products and appliances, enmeshing modern design with populist advertising in their pages, and by this process moving modern architecture into the public domain. No one did this more successfully than Charles and Ray Eames, their main avenue probably being their furniture design and particularly their chairs. The impact of the Eames chairs was huge. Not only were they unlike anything that had been seen before—their appearance in England being, in Alison Smithson's words, "a message of hope from another planet"⁹—but they were everywhere. Designed to be mass-

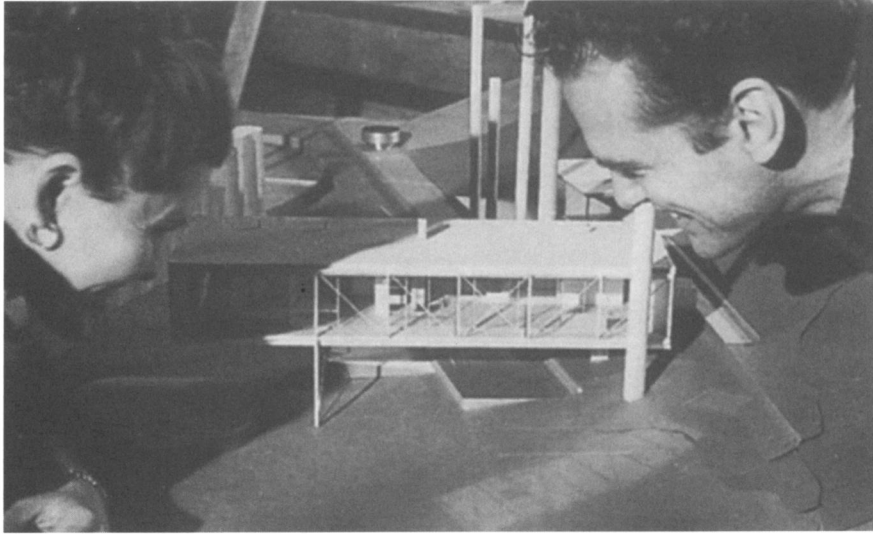


Fig. 5 Charles and Ray Eames looking at a model of Case Study House #8 1945

produced rather than expensive designer objects, they went on to be purchased in extraordinary numbers by offices, schools, and universities, pervading American culture and beyond. Images of the chairs appeared everywhere—on magazine covers, advertisements, album covers, and even in comic books—becoming an instantly recognizable design object. Banham goes so far as to attribute the reputation of the Eames House in part to the chairs, particularly the molded plywood, metal-legged LCM:

*The inherent originality and quality of the design [of the Eames House] are manifest, but it is quite likely that the simultaneous appearance in the world's press of Eames's globally successful steel and moulded plywood chair, the most compelling artifact of its generation in some ways, helped to focus world attention on everything that Eames was doing at the time.*¹⁰

This can be taken a step further to say that the inherent originality and quality of the design of the chairs are manifest, but it would be naïve to ignore the incredibly precise and creative way that the Eameses themselves imaged and, together with the Herman Miller furniture company, marketed them. The Eames-designed advertisements, graphic layouts, photo shoots, and furniture displays show a seductive persuasiveness that makes the chairs desirable beyond their innate appeal.

For above all, the Eameses were image-makers. This is the essence of their approach and their success. Everything that they did, they photographed, and frequently they also

appeared in the process, whether they were being pinned to the ground by the metal structures of their DCM chairs as on the cover of *Architectural Design* of September 1966, an issue devoted to an “Eames Celebration,” or posing balanced on the framework of their house under construction, proclaiming their presence. These are not isolated instances, but something akin to a trademark. One is constantly made aware of the presence of Charles and Ray Eames, so much so that their designs become tied up with their personalities. As with the very early description of CSH #8, where they appear as drawings, the viewer can identify with them as real characters and relate to them in a way that helps make their modern designs nonthreatening, acceptable, and desirable, because they have seen the Eameses living with them and very obviously enjoying them. By placing the Eameses in the images, we as viewers can project ourselves into that image through them.

One might look again at the image of Mies (Fig. 2) and compare it with a photograph of the Eameses with an early model of the house (Fig. 5). Where Mies stands beside the unfurnished model of his building and looks directly at the camera, Charles and Ray peer into their building, imagining themselves into the scaled-down model and so, in a way, inhabiting it and encouraging the viewer to imagine themselves in there, as well.

This continual personal exposure could be seen cynically as self-promotion, an exercise in cultivating fame or in making money, but that doesn't seem to be the intention. The Eameses were on a moral campaign to improve the world through good design.

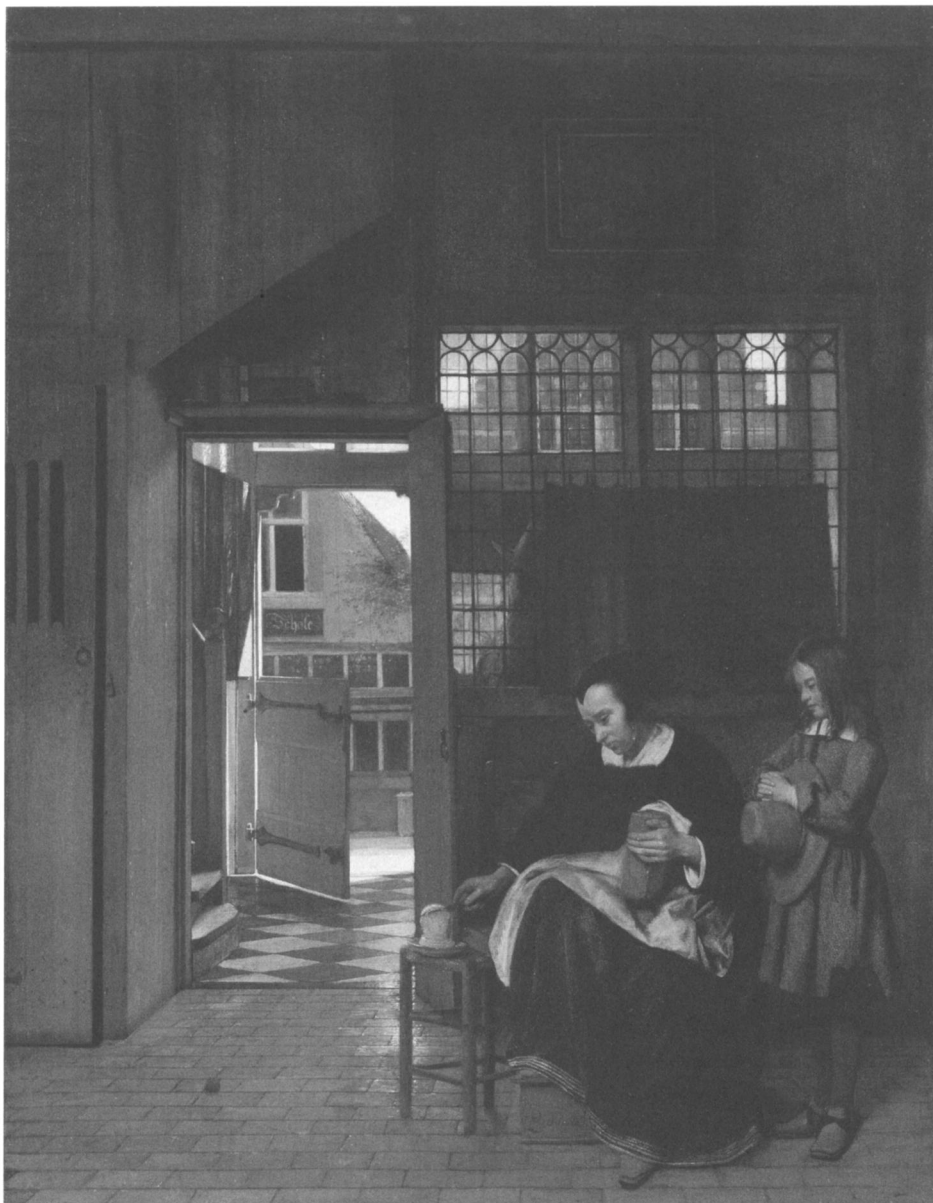


Fig. 6 *A Woman Preparing Bread for a Boy* Pieter de Hooch, 1660-63

Their use of imaging, and in particular photography, aims to teach people to see the beauty in objects. The Eameses' photographs are about a way of looking. In them, they juxtapose objects in different ways so that we see them differently, using the camera lens to turn what may have previously seemed ordinary into something quite beautiful. Peter Smithson calls this the "Eames-aesthetic" and likens it to the machine aesthetic of early modernism, saying that both are "art-forms of ordinary life and ordinary objects seen with an eye that sees the ordinary as also magical."¹¹ This "bringing together" is apparent throughout their work. It is there in their photography, which celebrates everyday things from around the world and in the seemingly casual yet deliberate arrangement of objects in their home. It can also be seen in

the way they managed to fuse science, technology, and art in projects for industry and in their innovative use of multiscreen imaging in their film presentations.

The Eames approach leads us to see things in a different way and, most importantly, in a way that seems accessible and open to all. It is true that we are constantly aware of their presence in this. It is their interpretations that we see, and we are reminded of this by their own appearance. It is a kind of personal fame, but one from which the viewer is not alienated. It is not a case of simply admiring their achievements—the abstract, removed fame of the artist, to be admired with awe—but instead is something to take part in. Their message is that anybody can be a designer, that design is a way of life rather than an inborn talent or skill. As Charles Eames explained, "I don't

believe in this 'gifted few' concept, just in people doing things they are really interested in doing."¹² For the Eameses, design equals life and everybody is a designer, and their house perfectly illustrates this view. Its framework of standard components acts as a framework for living, as can be clearly seen in the Shulman photograph of it. The design of the house is an "additive process,"¹³ occurring over the years as the house is inhabited. In that very first introduction to the house and its occupants in 1945, this approach was already apparent, with the house referred to as "a center of productive activities" and a "background for life in work."¹⁴ The architecture belongs to its occupants; the two are inseparable. It is interesting that Peter Smithson says the same of Eames chairs, drawing a comparison with Mies, "The chairs belong to



Fig. 7 *Family Making Music* Pieter de Hooch, 1663

the occupants not to the building. Mies chairs are especially of the building and not of the occupants.”¹⁵ The appearance of the Eameses in all of this is then perhaps not about seeking fame for their own achievements but is a way of communicating their design message, another juxtaposition, putting themselves into the picture to enable the viewer to identify with their creativity.

Despite the informal appearance achieved by the inclusion of Charles and Ray Eames “at home,” Shulman’s photograph is very carefully constructed. In the way the Eameses are shown in their home, surrounded by their belongings, direct comparisons can be drawn with seventeenth-century Dutch genre paintings, both in composition and, to some extent, intent. In these paintings, individuals or family groups are similarly posed

in some domestic activity, often amid a display of their material possessions. As examples, two paintings by Pieter de Hooch show some interesting parallels with Shulman’s photograph. Compositionally, the photograph and *A Woman Preparing Bread for a Boy* (Fig. 6) are very similar. The photograph is almost a mirror image of the painting in its positioning of the two figures with a long view to their side. The checkered rug in the Eames hallway echoes the floor tiles of the corridor out to the yard; the cupboards above the sofa area resemble the windows above the woman and child; and in both images a painting hangs at the top of the picture.

The similarities between the seventeenth-century paintings and the photograph may be merely coincidental but, allowing for the different historical contexts, something of

the same intention can be discerned. In his book *The Embarrassment of Riches*, Simon Schama speaks of the moral significance of these pictures of ordinary daily activities in settings of quiet cleanliness and order to a society that saw the home as a microcosm of the state and the domestic virtues as the essential foundation of all civic virtue.¹⁶ The figures and the setting thus become inseparable. In *Preparing Bread*, the figures of the woman and child are integral to this carefully constructed image of “rightness.” We see them simply as part of the whole design, and their home is transparently the “center of productive activities” and “background for life in work”¹⁷ that is the Eames vision.

If creativity or design is a way of life and accessible to all, then implicit in this is a proper valuing of material possessions. In



Fig. 8 Mies van der Rohe on the steps of the Farnsworth House ca. 1950

the photograph, the Eameses are surrounded by their possessions, and the sense of their importance is enhanced by almost everything being in focus, right down to the vase of flowers on the kitchen table in the background and the plants in the courtyard beyond that. Everything is given equal status as an object of beauty and although the eye is drawn to Charles and Ray sitting right in the center of the shot, it is distracted along the way by the multitude of other objects. A sofa frames the shot in the left-hand bottom corner but still allows everything on the coffee table immediately behind it to be seen. The cheese plant in the right-hand foreground does not hamper the view of the Eames lounge chair (Shulman points out that they would probably be trying to sell the chair).¹⁸ Likewise, the stacked cushions draw our attention to the rug on which they sit and do not obstruct the view of the candlesticks, which in turn allow the two objects that are the owners, the designers Charles and Ray, to be viewed in the same way. De Hooch's *Family Making Music* (Fig. 7) displays similar techniques and effects. In the painting, the figures are more numerous and more prominently placed, but we see the rug overtly displayed on the table, side by side with the woman's rich dress; stool, wardrobe, porcelain, and chandelier are all visible and in focus. Among these material signs of respectable affluence is the family making music together. The bass viol, prominently placed in the left foreground, is both a valuable object and a symbol of harmony.

In this painting and in the photograph of the Eameses, consumerism, in the sense of the enjoyment of one's own chosen possessions, seems to be embraced. The painting validates a domestic lifestyle, embodying the civic ideal of peace, virtue, and prosperity.¹⁹ Similarly, in the Eames House photograph, a whole lifestyle is being "sold" to the viewer. In the literal sense this may be happening with the furniture, but it seems that the stronger intention is to sell the idea of modern design to the world. In the process, Charles and Ray Eames come to symbolize a vision of the post-war American dream.

In this respect, their willingness to collaborate in this representation is crucial. Technological advances in all areas had favored them, not least in the increasing sophistication of the means of producing visual images and disseminating them to ever-widening audiences, which they used to their advantage. The quality and innovation of their furniture design ensured its widespread popularity at a time when the ideas of a new start and a better future were once more becoming thinkable. In a sense, the Eameses had been invited into many homes, as images in popular magazines and as the authors of the furniture. The fame attached to the Eameses is composed of many different ingredients, but much of it is dependent on the images of themselves as having a highly desirable, but attainable, lifestyle that they projected into the public's consciousness.

To understand how this differs from the fame of the "architect as genius," it is useful to compare the *Life* photograph again to an image of Mies. This time, he is outside the Farnsworth House (Fig. 8), built roughly at the same time as the Eames House, and similarly a design icon and one of the most frequently illustrated houses of the twentieth century.²⁰ In the photo, Mies sits on the steps outside the house with his characteristic cigar in hand. Like the Eames photograph, it is an informal shot, yet it has a different purpose. It is taken for posterity: the figure of the famous architect with the soon-to-be famous house as background, the creative genius with his work of art, with no other objects in the shot to distract the viewer. It is a recognizable image of the great architect, his appearance a kind of cameo role signifying that the object—the building—is indeed his creation. Of course, Mies did not live in his house, and the photographs of the two houses were taken at different stages in the buildings' lives and for different audiences. Yet, when one considers the history of this particular house, a large part of whose fame came from its apparent unsuitability for its owner and the battle of wills between the client's and architect's desires, it is very tempting to draw such a compari-

son. Indeed, it has been suggested that this house was a means to an end for Mies, a vehicle to make him famous, and that the client, Edith Farnsworth, rather than being “served” by the architect, took on the role of a patron to his art.²¹ This photograph, together with the numerous other beautifully composed shots of the Farnsworth House that seldom show any signs of life, demonstrates just how differently we view the Eameses and their house.

The Eameses’ fame is not a fame of personal aggrandizement that aims to lift the artist above others to a position of unique isolation. Instead, the vehicles by which their fame travels—their furniture and their house—are everyday things with which it is easy to identify. A lifestyle is projected that offers a domestic aesthetic in which ordinary

objects are elevated and given worth through personal creativity and choice. Living is placed at the center of architecture and design and, in 1950s America as in seventeenth-century Holland, ordinary domestic life is celebrated.

As we observe Charles and Ray Eames in the photograph of their living room, we allow ourselves to see our potential to be like them. The message that is communicated is not “look at me from afar.” Instead, Charles and Ray inhabit a place—and achieve a kind of fame—that we are invited into.

¹ Sir Norman Foster in Donald Albrecht, et al., eds., *The Work Of Charles and Ray Eames: A Legacy of Invention* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997), 179. ² Pierluigi Serraino explores the mechanisms of how this happened with one particular Julius Shulman photograph of Case Study House #22, in his essay “Framing Icons: Two Girls, Two Audiences. The Photographing of Case Study House #22,” in Kester Rattenbury, ed., *This Is Not Architecture: Media Constructions* (London: Routledge, 2002). ³ Reyner Banham, “Klarheit, Ehrlichkeit, Einfachkeit... And Wit Too! The Case Study Houses in the World’s Eyes,” in Elizabeth A.T. Smith, ed., *Blueprints for Modern Living: History and Legacy of the Case Study Houses* (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1989), 183–95. ⁴ Ibid., 183. ⁵ Julius Shulman, interview by the author, June 18, 2001. ⁶ Julius Shulman, *Photographing Architecture and Interiors* (Los Angeles: Balcony Press, 2000), 101. ⁷ Jonathan Hill, ed., *Architecture: The Subject is Matter* (London: Routledge, 2001), 57–71. ⁸ Shulman, interview. ⁹ Alison Smithson, “And Now the Dharmas Are Dying Out in Japan,” *Architectural Design*, September 1966, 448. ¹⁰ Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1971), 223. ¹¹ Peter Smithson, “Just a Few Chairs and a House: An Essay on the Eames-aesthetic,” *Architectural Design*, September 1966, 443. ¹² Beatriz Colomina, “Reflections on the Eames House,” in *The Work Of Charles and Ray Eames*, 129. ¹³ This is a term used by Michael Brawne in his article, “The Wit of Technology,” in *Architectural Design*, September 1966, 452. ¹⁴ *Arts & Architecture*, December 1945, 44. ¹⁵ Peter Smithson, 446. ¹⁶ Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (London: Collins, 1987). ¹⁷ *Arts & Architecture*, December 1945, 44. ¹⁸ Shulman, interview. ¹⁹ Schama, 305. ²⁰ Beatriz Colomina draws an illuminating comparison between the Eameses and Mies, using an image of Mies at the Farnsworth House under construction in “Reflections on the Eames House,” 127–49. ²¹ Alice T. Friedman, *Women and the Making of the Modern House: A Social and Architectural History* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998), Chapter 4.