

# Radical Shifts

RESHAPING THE INTERIOR AT PARSONS, 1955-1985

Danielle Epstein

Jenny Florence

Joanna Merwood-Salisbury

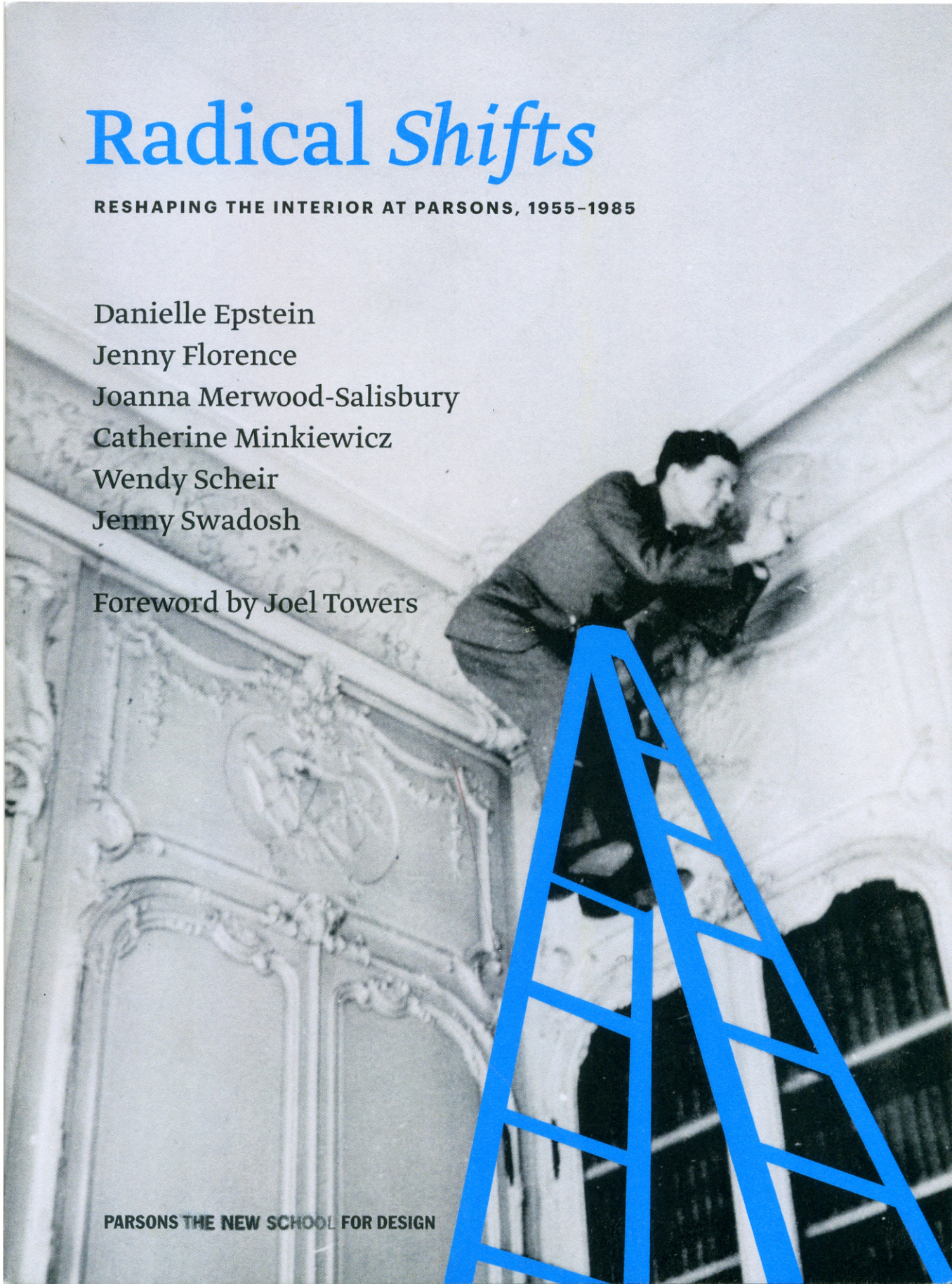
Catherine Minkiewicz

Wendy Scheir

Jenny Swadosh

Foreword by Joel Towers

PARSONS THE NEW SCHOOL FOR DESIGN



## “An unParsonly Subject Matter”: Interior Design, Environmental Activism and Social Well-being

JENNY FLORENCE

Mounting an exhibition in 1965, Parsons School of Design interior design students opted to forgo the usual meticulous watercolors, reproduction period furniture, carefully considered color studies and coordinated fabric swatches that had made the school synonymous with elegant design. Antique vases were replaced by porcelain of another kind: a toilet, borrowed from a tenement apartment, took a central position in the show. (Fig. 1, pg. 9) “The shock of the unParsonly subject matter,” opined *Interiors* magazine, “[was] overwhelming....Why would the students of a design school that stands for luxurious, raffine décor be involved in [such a thing]?”<sup>1</sup>

Five years before Parsons would join The New School for Social Research, a university founded on radically inclusive educational principles, a new approach to interior design was already clearly emerging. Far from being localized, the shifts that redefined the study of interior design at Parsons reflected a reordering of priorities that was pervasive among a new generation of designers, students and, indeed, a large section of American society.

Through the 1960s and early 1970s, environmental and social issues became increasingly central to public discourse. This was in part a reaction to the years immediately preceding, during which the United States had experienced a period of unprecedented affluence and consumerism. Design was integral to the realization and reinforcement of this economic growth. To kick-start the post-war economy, manufacturers had introduced a glut of desirable goods to captivate Americans' interest and capture a share of their new spending power. Stimulated by Federal Housing Administration incentives for returning soldiers, the single-family suburban home proliferated, and became a locus for consumerism. Color and styling changed as frequently as the seasons, encouraging housewives to abandon avocado and redecorate in rose. Furniture, appliances, jewelry and clothing were produced at unprecedented rates using processes and materials that had

1 “Parsons Exhibition; Seniors Scan Slum Housing,” *Interiors* vol. 124 (May 1965): 10

been perfected during the war effort. The same technology that had, in a flash, ended the war and created a shadow that would hang over the U.S. for decades, powered the country's growing cities and sprawling suburbs. Americans kept their upholstery stain-proof, their lawns pest-free and their food preserved and fall-out-shelter ready with a profusion of new synthetic compounds whose effects would not be widely questioned for over a decade.

The publication of a string of books elucidating the consequences of American consumers' wholesale embrace of synthetic materials would spark concern for the impact industrial progress was having on the environment and on each other. In his 1960 exposé, *The Waste Makers*, journalist Vance Packard revealed manufacturers' methods for encouraging wasteful and unnecessary consumption by designing goods with limited life spans. Rachel Carson's 1962 *Silent Spring* exposed the environmental impact of Americans' new consumption habits. A biologist adept at explaining complex ideas in simple terms, Carson traced the life cycle of DDT, a commonly used synthetic pesticide, and its subtle but potentially devastating effect on wildlife. Hugely successful, *Silent Spring* not only increased popular awareness, but affected national policy. Beginning with the Kennedy administration, the environment became an increasingly pressing federal concern. Stewart Udall, Secretary of the Interior to both President John F. Kennedy and his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, took a particular interest in the environment. Over his eight-year career as Secretary, Udall was integral to the adoption of several acts designed to help preserve clean air and water, wilderness and endangered species.

*It was an era in which rhetoric could jump from demanding that natural resources be conserved, to abolishing the draft, to appealing for better conditions in public housing.*

However, despite average Americans' growing concern for environmental health and the government's efforts to drive positive change from the top down, the most emphatic message emanated from the younger generation. On university campuses across the country, students radicalized by the Civil Rights and Anti-War movements began to adopt environmentalism with mounting fervor. Having grown up under the constant and tangible threat of the Cold War, for the many young people becoming aware of environmentalism the planet seemed as likely now to succumb to environmental disaster as it had to nuclear annihilation, with design and technology at the heart of either scenario.

While some advocated stripping away the material baggage of modern society and returning to the land, many students and recent graduates understood design to be central to the "tread-lightly" revolution. If used responsibly, design could liberate Americans from the cycle of industrial mass production that had led them to this point. Working independently of major designers and manufacturers, they promoted design that utilized natural or carefully-employed synthetic materials that would have the

smallest impact on the earth. Offering an alternative to the fiberglass, polypropylene, and tubular steel objects sold by the “Establishment,” grassroots design was oriented around nomadic, blow-up and do-it-yourself ideals. The influential *Whole Earth Catalog*, first published in 1968, not only printed excerpts from countercultural books—among them designer, thinker, and futurist Buckminster Fuller’s *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth*; and, in installments, Gurney Norman’s novel *Divine Right’s Trip*, which is introduced by the protagonist’s VW bus—but also listed supplies, tools and advice about everything from making your own beer, to building a tensile structure, to proper land use. Page 107 of the 1971 edition featured San Francisco-based design and art collective Ant Farm’s “Inflatocookbook,” an irreverent guide to the many uses and benefits of inflatable architecture. Ant Farm’s amorphous and balloon-like shelter — “a temple, a funhouse, a suffocation torture device, a pleasure dome” — was collapsible, malleable, portable, and recyclable. Once deflated it left no indication that it had ever been erected. Best of all, anybody could build one, and “maybe maybe anybody can should must take space-making beautifying into her, his own hands.”<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, the Do-It-Yourself ethos that played a significant role in mid twentieth-century environmentalism was very much alive at Parsons, reflected in the publications *Furniture in 24 Hours*, and *More Furniture in 24 Hours*, pattern books for at-home construction put out by industrial designer and Parsons instructor Spiros Zakas with his students. (Fig. 8) The books, dedicated to Parsons Environmental Design chairman Allen Tate, gather plans for original designs that are easily produced, assembled and reconfigured at the whim of the individual, emancipating them from the clutches of Herman Miller and La-Z-Boy. The Knockdownable Sensuous Topograph conceived by student Stephanie Dietrich and described in *Time* magazine as “a cross between a playpen and a bed,”<sup>3</sup> was essentially a wooden frame containing psychedelically-patterned stuffed forms of various shapes and sizes, ready to be rearranged for maximum comfort and visual appeal. (Fig. 9)

The environmental groundswell crested on April 22, 1970 with the first Earth Day. From its inception, and likely in recognition of its most enthusiastic constituents—college students—Earth Day was an educational affair. (Fig. 10, pg. 21) Environmental teach-ins and activities were organized on campuses across the country, Parsons as energetically as anywhere else. Among the speakers that day—and appropriately for a design school—was Stewart Brand, creator of the *Whole Earth Catalog* and, according to the press release, “a very far-out individual.”<sup>4</sup>

By the summer of 1970, concern for the environment had been intensifying for nearly a decade. In light of this, the events that disrupted that year’s Aspen Design Summit seem unsurprising, if not inevitable. The annual conference convened for a week of discussion under the title “Environment by Design.”<sup>5</sup> As usual, the conference brought together many of the already iconic figures of modern design, including George Nelson, Charles Eames, Reyner Banham, Herbert Bayer, Saul Bass, and Eliot Noyes. Students and design radicals came, too (among them members of Ant Farm), descending on the conference by the hundreds. It rapidly became clear that they defined “environment” differently from the senior designers. Incensed by the appar-

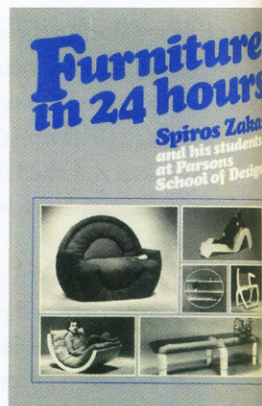


Fig 8-9 *Furniture in 24 Hours*, a book put out by Parsons instructor Spiros Zakas and his students, collected designs for at-home furniture construction, including a pattern for the Knockdownable Sensuous Topograph and the Banana Lounge, 1976. PIC records, KDA

2 Ant Farm, *Inflatocookbook*, (San Francisco: Ant Corps, 1973), 6.

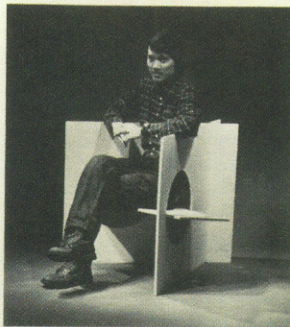
3 “Living: Almost Instant Furniture,” *Time* magazine (January 9, 1978): accessed January 28, 2011, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,912084-1,00.html>.

4 “Earth Day – April 22: Environmental Teach-In” press release, 1970. Joseph Marcella student work collection, KDA.

5 Alice Twemlow, “I can’t talk to you if you say that: An ideological collision at the International Design Conference at Aspen,” *Design and Culture*, vol. 1, issue 1 (2009): 33.

## 2 E-Z CHAIR

YUTAKA MATSUMOTO



### Materials

- one piece plywood,  $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 36" x 73"

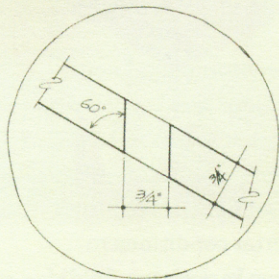
### Tools

- electric drill
- electric saw
- coping saw
- sandpaper

### Method

Examine illustrations

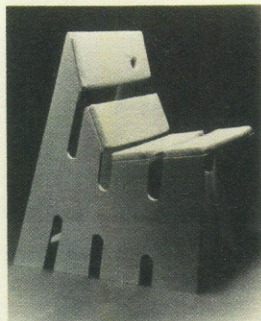
- cut plywood with electric saw into **three** pieces (sizes shown in drawing) (**one** narrow piece is for the seat and the other **two** pieces are for the supports)
- using electric drill and electric saw, cut 15" diameter circle out of the supporting parts
- using electric saw and coping saw, make a 15" slit in each supporting part; width of each slit is  $\frac{3}{4}$ " and each slit is at 60° angle from surface (top view is shown in detail in drawing)
- using sandpaper, make surfaces smooth
- fit the supporting parts together, then put the seat in position



4

## 4 SLAB CHAIR

DEE MacDONALD



### Materials

- one sheet plywood, finished on one side,  $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 4' x 8'
- eight oak cleats:
  - four cleats 1" x 2" x 6"
  - two cleats 1" x 2" x 6 $\frac{3}{4}$ "
  - two cleats 1" x 2" x 7"
- four oak cleats:
  - two cleats 1" x 2" x 6 $\frac{3}{4}$ "
  - two cleats 1" x 2" x 7"
- white glue
- 24 finishing nails, 1" length
- plastic wood
- one qt. primer
- one qt. acrylic yellow bright paint

### Optional

- four cushions, make or buy

### Tools

- paper, 36" x 36"
- pencil
- tape
- ruler
- jigsaw
- hammer

- clamps
- sandpaper
- white glue
- $\frac{1}{4}$ " drill for hole, 1" hole saw
- brush, 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ " width
- nail punch
- circle template

### Method

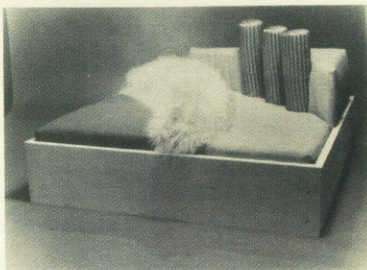
Examine illustrations

- draw 2" grid on paper
- draw design on grid for two side panels of chair
- cut plywood to obtain two 3' x 3' pieces
- tape paper to unfinished side of plywood; line up bottom of paper design with edge of wood transfer pattern onto piece of 3' x 3' plywood

8

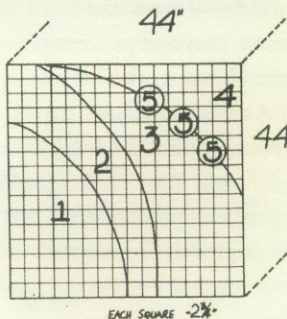
## 6 THE KNOCKDOWNABLE SENSUOUS TOPOGRAPH

STEPHANIE DIETERICH



### Materials

- four pieces clear pine, each  $5/4$ " x 12" x 49 $\frac{1}{2}$ "
- one piece clear pine,  $5/4$ " x 3" x 14"
- heavy flathead wood screws, 2" length
- white glue
- chalk to match fabric
- 3" thick polyurethane
- fabric and thread for cushions (can be different colors)
- four upholstery zippers, 60" each
- one 50' roll polyester fiber
- three pieces polyurethane, each 1" x 2 x 3'
- 4 square brown wrapping paper
- masking tape
- finishing nails, 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ "
- eight flathead screws, 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ "
- two pieces plywood, each  $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 2' x 4'
- pt. latex primer
- pt. latex paint



## 7 BANANA LOUNGE

STEPHANIE DIETERICH



### Materials

- Note:** Before purchasing foam and yellow fabric, read **Method**
- one good-looking, curvy bunch of **five** bananas, each with **four** skin panels
  - three sheets polyurethane, 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 6' x 7'
  - five-pound bag polyurethane scraps
  - 12 yds. 60"-wide yellow fabric (polyester and cotton)
  - five yds. 60"-wide stretchy green fabric
  - five 60" upholstery zippers
  - carpet thread
  - threads to match fabric
  - one roll polyester fiber, fifty ft. long
  - ball of cord
- ### Tools
- fine point felt-tip pen
  - Exacto knife with #11 blade
  - pencil
  - graph paper
  - brown wrapping paper, 20 yds.

- yardstick
- one piece light-colored chalk
- scissors
- sewing machine
- needles, sharps and darning
- toilet plunger

### Method

Examine illustrations

- before separating bunch of bananas, number each panel on each banana with felt-tip pen as follows:

1st banana	1, 2, 3, 4
2nd "	5, 6, 7, 8
3rd "	9, 10, 11, 12
4th "	13, 14, 15, 16
5th "	17, 18, 19, 20

- make note of the position of each banana in the bunch; you will be duplicating each and assembling them

ent apathy of their elders and turned off by their commitment to industry, students staged performances, installations, and dialogue in an attempt to communicate with their hosts (although many did attend the conference with the aim of hijacking and stalling it altogether). Considering that design intervention had by that time long been part of the environmental movement, the agitation that arose from the conference organizers' failure to make it part of the official program was not undeserved. The activists ultimately demanded resolution on eleven points, including that designers "refuse to create structures, advertisements, products, and develop ideas whose primary purpose is to sell materials for the sole purpose of creating profit," and "that a moratorium be declared on all extractive industries until their impact on the environment can be proven not to be ecologically disastrous."<sup>6</sup> Other resolutions went far afield of environmental issues: the second resolution demanded that "the Department of Health, Education and Welfare provide free medical care and adequate housing and guarantee of a balanced diet to all who live in the United States."<sup>7</sup>

A wide gulf may seem to exist between demands for environmental neutrality and social welfare. Indeed, the scope of the resolutions was bewildering to the conference organizers. However, the resolutions at Aspen reflect a particular blurring of boundaries that seems to characterize the activism of an era in which rhetoric could jump from demanding that natural resources be conserved, to abolishing the draft, to appealing for better conditions in public housing. This boundary-hopping was certainly true in design, a field based on responding to users' needs, in all their variety. In their introduction to inflatable architecture in the *Inflatocookbook*, the Ant Farm professes its intention to continue "[to] unfold, inflate and see each other in a black white red purple cloudballoon [that] can (conditions right) help to break down people's category walls about each other."<sup>8</sup>

*The belief driving the non-traditional projects taken on by Parsons interior design students in the 1960s and '70s was that there is an interconnection between a person's mental well-being and the health of their surroundings.*

As had been the case for environmental health, the new concern for social well-being was reflected in federal policy. These issues were also central to contemporary design discourse. In President Johnson's view, the health of the environment and the health of Americans were two sides of the same coin, inextricably linked in his concept of the Great Society.<sup>9</sup> Beyond preserving the environment for its own protection, Johnson considered unspoiled natural surroundings necessary to the happiness of the American people, as important as good housing. Pristine wilderness was part of a flourishing ecosystem; it was also a place for Americans to picnic.

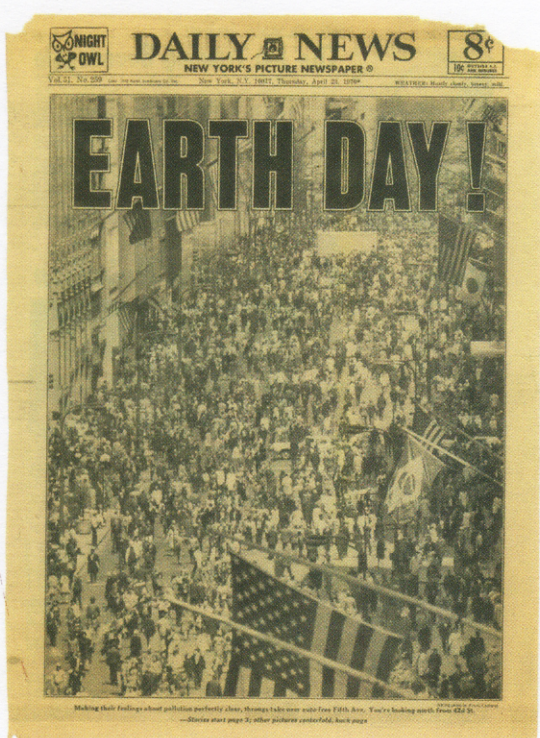
So, what was the interior design class of 1965 hoping to accomplish by featuring a toilet—and half of a tenement bathroom—in their graduation show? They were declaring that not only a healthy natural environment but also a healthy interior environment were essential to an individual's well-being.

6 Quoted in Twemlow, 37.

7 Quoted in Twemlow, endnote 1.

8 Ant Farm, 6.

9 Adam Rome, "Give Earth A Chance": The Environmental Movement and the Sixties," *The Journal of American History* (September 2003): 532-533.



Titled "A Place to Live," the exhibition examined sections of an apartment in Spanish Harlem in order to determine something about the effects of inadequate housing on the underprivileged. The exhibition marked a turning point in the interior design program, which had theretofore been primarily concerned with historic accuracy and aesthetic appeal. From the late 1960s through the '70s, as Parsons' interior design program was reviewed, reconfigured, and renamed 'environmental design', students took on projects that were increasingly socially and community-oriented. Addressing the Alumni Committee on November 10, 1969, program chairman Allen Tate traced the changes that had been introduced in the Interior Design program, noting the "explosive ramifications" of the graduate exhibition of 1965. He also listed the community projects that students had been involved in over the preceding five years. These included designs for a hospital, a probation office, a library, and a women's correctional facility.<sup>10</sup>

In this spirit, in 1967 three students, Luis Rey, Howard Kaplan, and Barbara Greene, were assigned to redesign Mobilization for Youth, a Lower East Side counseling center for at-risk teens. (see Fig. 7, pg. 15) The students' approach to the assignment demonstrates how the field of interior design had expanded, taking cues from sociology and psychology. Rey, Kaplan and Greene spent a month reviewing the building, its programs and its neighborhood. They interviewed its director (who requested the addition of windows of bullet-proof glass) and its staff. Most importantly, they worked to understand its clients. The details of the resulting design brief reflect the students' sensitivity for the needs of the young people, and acknowledge the important role that the center's interior environment could play in meeting those needs.

Fig. 10 Earth Day is front page news at the *New York Post* and the *Daily News*, April 22, 1970.

10 Allen Tate, "Notes towards a philosophy of design education," (see pg. 10)

Recognizing that Mobilization for Youth's first challenge was to get their clients—"wary, negative, [and] equally distrustful of police and school situations"<sup>11</sup>—through the door, Rey, Kaplan, and Greene redesigned the intake area as transparently as possible to communicate the purpose of the center and coax apprehensive clients into the building. Wary young people would have to quickly discern the nature of the center's activities or risk being maligned by their friends. The rest of the interior was designed with similar insight. The students opened sections of the warren-like space, and made others more private. Anticipating clients' skittishness about surveillance, they created waiting areas outside the view of the center's staff, and, recognizing the importance of instilling a sense of fellowship among the teens, they planned rooms designed to subtly collect individuals into groups. Finally, the interior design students devised a system of color-coding to minimize clients' frustration as they navigated the sometimes maze-like space.

*To create an environment more conducive to the rehabilitative aims of the institution, the students suggested minimizing the demoralizing effects of long corridors and monotonous common areas by painting spiraling colored bands and color blocks.*

A year later, the same three students, joined by a fourth, Ann Gilford, drew from their experience working on the Mobilization for Youth project to redesign the interior of New York's infamous House of Detention for Women, officially renamed the Correctional Institutions for Women. Their designs for the facility's interior intimated just as much of a tidal shift in attitude toward its inhabitants as its renaming. If inmates' cells were now called "rooms," their design would have to embody this change. To create an environment more conducive to the rehabilitative aims of the institution, the students suggested minimizing the demoralizing effects of long corridors and monotonous common areas by painting spiraling colored bands and color blocks. In fact, many of the group's suggestions relied on the positive psychological effects of color, not to mention the cost-effectiveness of paint. "Cheerful, bright paint," pointed out Barbara Greene, "doesn't cost any more than drab colors."<sup>12</sup> They also proposed adding built-in furniture and half-walls to give inmates a sense of privacy and intimacy.

The belief driving the non-traditional projects taken on by Parsons interior design students in the 1960s and '70s was that there is an interconnection between a person's mental well-being and the health of their surroundings. As a 1970 *Design and Environment* article remarked, "professional design societies [have] faced up to the fact that social unrest, on the one hand, and physical decay and environmental pollution, on the other, were central to the designer's concern."<sup>13</sup> As unusual as these initiatives must have seemed to the Parsons-produced interior designers who graduated before the 1960s, their "unParsonly subject matter" would be celebrated for the next two decades, as the role of interior design continued to be reexamined, and redefined. ♦

11 George M. Whitney, "Like, Man, it's for Real: Parsons Seniors Help Mobilization for Youth, Inc.," *Interiors* vol. 126 (June 1967), 121

12 "Four Parsons Students Tackle Women's Prison Design," *Interiors* vol. 127 (December 1967): 14.

13 "Design and Environment Welcomes you to a New Constituency: Designers and Scientists Dedicated to Rebuilding the Environment," *Design and Environment* vol. 1, no. 1 (1970): 20.



