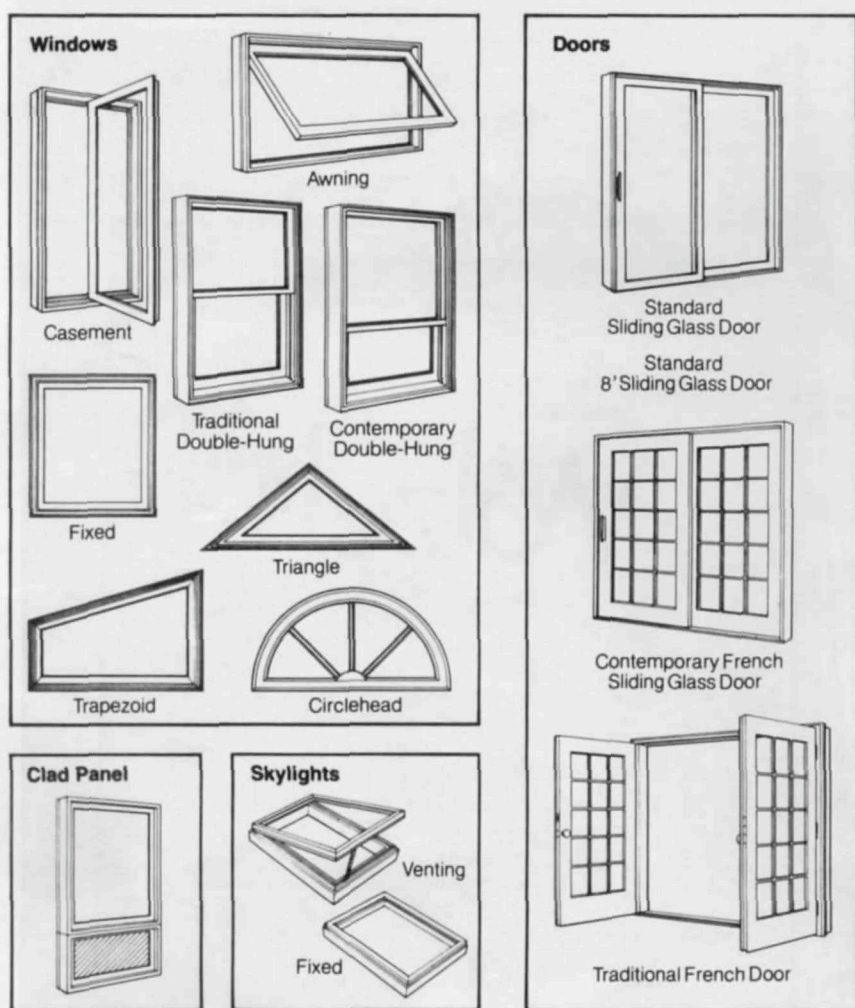


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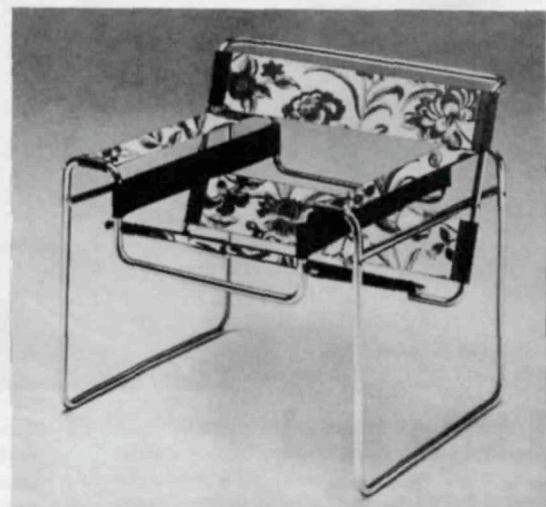
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Our House the Bauhaus, Or, Life Without Laura Ashley



(Illustration by Celeste Vickrey)

An Architect's Wife

Having been raised in rural Connecticut, where one is perpetually surrounded by New England saltboxes, wing chairs, hooked rugs, and pewter, it came as quite a shock to my posterior to spend three hours in a Wassily chair at the cocktail party where I met my architect husband-to-be. Later, I should have known by the way his lip curled in disdain at the sight of a set of matching Limoges placecards we'd received as a wedding gift that we were headed for trouble. ("You can give those to the Goodwill.")

When our first furniture purchase finally arrived - a Mies van der Rohe coffee table and two matching (you guessed it) Wassily chairs - it was explained that this was "museum-quality furniture" that would "increase greatly in value over time" and would "look terrific in any room." On the positive side, it is and it does. Otherwise, the table requires three gallons of Windex per annum, and has opened my shin once and our daughter's head twice. And anyone who has tried to read anything from *Goodnight Moon* to *War and Peace* in a Wassily chair had better have buns of steel.

As chrome, glass, plastic laminate and Andy Warhol entered my life - along with the requisite white and/or gray walls, wire pulls, and Luxo lamps - visions of Queen Anne/Chippendale, Schumacher fabrics, and brass accents went by the wayside. It appeared there was to be no meeting of the twain.

When Mary Emmerling, whom I remembered as a fellow staffer at *Mademoiselle* magazine during college days, published her glossily photographed book on the "American Country" look, I rushed out and bought a copy. Here, at last, was a viable alternative! At the same time, I poured over the Laura Ashley catalogues that came to our door. I loved the romantic, lofty bedrooms with hand-stenciled floors, mini-print fabrics and wicker baskets of dried heather. Outside Laura's bedrooms there were always sunny, cloud-scudded moors and scenes of bovine passivity.

Once I placed a sheaf of dried wheat on the mantel in our spartanly-furnished gray living room before departing with my children for vacation. When we returned to my husband the wheat was nowhere to be seen ("That bleeping stuff had bugs in it.") It had vanished, gone to some purgatory for scorned minutiae, along with the two needlepoint pillows I'd left unguarded on the sofa. Rest in peace.

In all fairness to my well-educated architect, I can say that he does have an admirable knowledge of traditional and antique furnishings. He is, in fact, from a part of the country which abounds in such items and he knows them well. Too well, I'm afraid. If the \$300,000 highboy cannot be had, let's go without it. I have also discovered that, like a person with some chronic condition, he cannot control his "architect-ness." He's been trained too well, thanks to Rice and Harvard.

When a small sofa upholstered in a flower-and-bird motif was placed in our

library, my husband hyperventilated so badly he had to be taken to the Medical Center. He still gets a nervous tick in his left eyelid whenever he walks through the room, and has been known to open up a folding plastic chair to watch television there when no one is sitting on the sofa.

Could it really be true that the longer two people are together, the more alike they become? To my utter horror, I recently have discovered my own tastes in some areas are becoming more "architectural." It started in small ways. I began buying kitchen accessories only in white. One memorable afternoon, in a burst of creative energy, I placed all the labels on the bottoms of our white-capped spice jars so that they wouldn't show, then memorized where the jars were on the rack. It gave our spice rack a much cleaner line. A major family upheaval occurred when my mother gazed sympathetically around the living room and unwittingly quipped, "But where are your drapes, honey?"

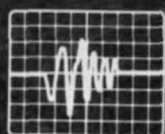
I came close to seeking therapy when it occurred to me that years of renovating and whitening apartments and houses had made hardware a major concern in my life. I found myself obsessed with an item of design of which I hitherto had been blissfully ignorant. "Will you look at this!" I'd screech in indignation. "They painted over the hardware!" Noting the absence of wire pulls, I'd confide to my husband, "Can you believe those hideous-looking casket handles the Smiths put on their kitchen cabinets? Are they sitting on their brains?"

When I began using the Dustbuster to remove specks from the undersides of the Wassily chairs, being extra careful not to scratch the leather, I realized that either I was going to have to purchase a Laura Ashley lamp within 24 hours, or enroll in a post-baccalaureate architectural program and open my own firm. I bought the lamp.

Gradually, our home is moving towards an eclectic ambience somewhere in the gray regions (oops, there's that color again) between "Less is More" and "Less is a Bore" (thank you, Robert Venturi). We are currently a hodge-podge of chrome and glass, flowers and brass, with one Laura Ashley lamp thrown in for punch. Our wire pulls are now white instead of only chrome. Well, some of them are. Our about-to-be-renovated-for-the-past-three-years kitchen will still be all white, though I did lobby inexhaustibly for a red or blue sink, or a Mexican tile or two. The microwave oven has been temporarily vetoed because the best-designed door comes only in black.

"We are talking about a very serious problem here," I confided to a friend one day at lunch. "We are talking about a man who won't even wear light-blue underwear." "So what?" she said, a bit unsympathetically, I thought, "at least he doesn't wear white socks."

During this period of "kitchen detente," we are finding our lines a bit less firmly drawn and negotiations are continuing. And I just saw the most darling pine hutch over on Bissonnet. ■



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