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Life Work:

The Architecture of Joseph Esherick

By Frank D. Welch, FAIA



Frank Welch

Joseph Esherick's architecture grows out of a disciplined lifelong quest—not just for a sense of place but for a sense of humanity.

THE WORK OF CALIFORNIA ARCHITECT JOSEPH ESHERICK has been recognized at the highest levels of his profession: In 1989, he was awarded the Gold Medal by the American Institute of Architects; in 1986 his firm, Esherick Homsey Dodge and Davis, won the AIA's Firm of the Year Award; and in 1982 he was named the AIA/ACSA Educator of the Year.

Despite this recognition, Esherick's work remains relatively unknown, even within the profession. In a time when architects are questioning the very idea of what it means to practice their profession, the work of someone like Esherick—dedicated to his craft, idealistic, humanistic—should be better known and better understood.

Diffident by nature, Esherick has never sought publicity or architectural fame, preferring instead the low profile, both in his life and in the buildings he designs. Recently, he said that he doesn't care for buildings that demand the viewer's attention. "I like for the stuff to move into the background—to become an architecture that you don't 'see'," he says. This attitude has guided him from the beginning of his career.

Esherick is a careful man with a quiet drawl, who for almost 50 years has been creating and advocating an architecture of restraint, reason, and responsiveness to place. Although Esherick's 58-member firm, Esherick Homsey Dodge and Davis, is successful and busy with large-scale projects, the bearded, lean Esherick—over six feet tall—regularly wears blue denim work shirts and khakis to the firm's offices on the second floor of a remodeled loft building in San Francisco's Mission District.

The emphasis on simplicity, restraint, and cerebral inquiry in every aspect of life started in Esherick's childhood. He was born at home in 1914 in Philadelphia. He and his sister were raised in comfort, by a successful engineer father and a mother, an ardent pacifist, with broad cultural and literary interests. Esherick entered the University of Pennsylvania's department of architecture in 1932. Penn at that time offered, under Paul Cret, one of the better Beaux Arts-style architecture educations, but Esherick's attention was easily diverted from the classical orders by the writings of such European "new world" designers as Le Corbusier. At the same time, Esherick was introduced to Philadelphia's George Howe, the Beaux Arts architect who converted to modernism in middle age and who, with William Lescaze, created the landmark Philadelphia Saving Fund Society Building, the first international-style high-rise in the U.S. "Howe spoke about the dynamics of space in a building, how it moves around you in subtle, asymmetric ways," Esherick remembers. Esherick himself was influenced by this freer aesthetic vision. Howe's modernist prescription for an architecture that could remake an imperfect world also had a potent effect on Esherick, who, as he matured during those Depression years, was becoming a political idealist seeking broad, people-focused solutions.

Esherick's primary teacher and inspiration, however, was Wharton Esherick, his father's older brother, a painter, sculptor, and creator of organic, hand-crafted furniture. Wharton Esherick felt strongly that certain ethical truths concerning art, process, and craft were inherent in the materials employed for the job at hand. He espoused a simple, direct approach, unfet-



Left: The spiraling oak-trunk stair in Wharton Esherick's studio; the sculptor said of it: "No one will fall down this stair. It's too dangerous."

Below: Young Joe Esherick helping his uncle, Wharton Esherick, a renowned sculptor and furniture maker, c. 1936 in Paoli, Pa.



Facing page: Philadelphian turned Bay Area architect Joseph Esherick, photographed in 1993, during his first visit to the Kimball Art Museum in Fort Worth

tered by formal preconception. "How would a farmer do it?" he would ask. These homespun, entirely American assertions blended seamlessly with the moral emphasis on honesty in Esherick's European influences.

Uncle Wharton shared a warm, bantering friendship with Louis Kahn, with whom he spent many evenings of drink and talk, sometimes including young Joe. Once, on a visit home to Philadelphia, Joe spent the night at his uncle's when Kahn was there at his most voluble. Joe served the drinks and Wharton cooked. Helping his uncle clean up the kitchen the next morning, he recalled Wharton's first words, muttered through the fog of a hangover, "Lou would make a helluva good architect if he didn't talk so goddam much!" Kahn helped design and build Wharton Esherick's workshop, which is now the Wharton Esherick Museum with its famous sculptural spiraling staircase crafted from an oak trunk. (The sculptor said of it: "No one will fall down this stair. It's too dangerous.")

Following a trip to Europe after his graduation from Penn, Esherick made plans to move to San Francisco. To Esherick, then 24 years old, California seemed warm with possibility and tolerance, a place where new design ideas were taking hold. Philadelphia and the East Coast seemed by comparison conservative and crippled with old ways of thinking.

The design ideas that drew Esherick to California had their origins in the work of a group of ar-



Left: Houses, 3200 block of Pacific Avenue, San Francisco, by Ernest Coxhead, et al. (1902), showing hallmarks of what historian David Gephard calls the first-generation Bay Area style, which would influence Esherick's mentors and later Esherick himself

chitects who came to the Bay Area in the late 19th century—Ernest Coxhead, Willis Polk, Bernard Maybeck, A. C. Schweinfurth, and A. Page Brown. They blended the woodsy vernacular that evolved in the instant mining towns of the mid-19th century with an eclectic language of medieval, gothic, Queen Anne, and arts and crafts sources.

Added to this brew was, in historian David Gebhard's opinion, an odd tendency toward contradiction within an overall orderly format: interior spaces that are partially open and partially closed-up, along with plans that, at first glance, seem logical and clear, but turn out to be complicated and quirky. Maybe most significant was a tendency to create awkward and often visually



Above: Esherick with Gardner Dailey, c. 1940

Right: House in Woodside, Calif. (1940), by Gardner Dailey



Below: William Wurster, c. 1935, whose work Esherick preferred to Dailey's because of the directness and "ordinariness" of Wurster's style.



discordant forms, textures, and details, joined with refined and polished characteristics to produce a response to the non-formalist influences associated with the Bay Area's terrain, way of life, and climate, itself both opaque and clear.

The inheritors of this Bay Area tradition, when Esherick arrived in the San Francisco, included Gardner Dailey, his competitor William Wurster, John Dinwiddie, and Michael Goodman; Wurster (1893-1973) and Dailey (1895-1967) were the Bay Area's most influential residential architects. "Gardner was a completely charming Irish storyteller who could talk anyone into anything—a lot like O'Neil Ford," Esherick remembers, Wurster was a strong presence in architectural circles, and though Esherick ended up working for Dailey—starting at \$20 a week—he says Wurster had a larger influence on him. "Bill just did it, while Gardner would fuss around with various details for the pictorial value. By contrast, Wurster's houses had a plain, ordinary, 'artless' quality about them that I liked." Not everyone found this quality praiseworthy; Henry-Russell Hitchcock, the critic



The Grover House of 1939 (left) and the Harley-Stevens House of 1940 (above) were examples of the work by Wurster that

critic Henry-Russell Hitchcock found disturbing for its "unexpected harshness."

and expert on European urbanism, visited the area in 1940 and was continually disturbed by the "unexpected harshness" of Wurster's buildings.

Before leaving to serve as a Navy air combat officer in World War II, and while he was working for Dailey, Esherick and his then-wife Becky, also an architect, designed a small two-story house on a sloping wooded site in Ross, a Marin County suburb. The house exemplified a format that would become Esherick's signature in the years following the war and that he later described as "packing the box." The parts of the double-layered plan fit carefully into a redwood-sheathed cube anchored with an L-shaped deck wrapped around living and dining areas. The limited interior space expands vertically, with a double-height living room, and horizontally, through walls of glass carried to the floor and adjoining wall.

When the war ended, Esherick, with Becky joining him, opened a practice of his own in downtown San Francisco in a former dentist's office. In 1946, the first year of Esherick's private practice, most of the 30 jobs logged in are residential and most were sent by Gardner Dailey; the only nonresidential job was a facility for training guide dogs for the blind that he did with Bob Steiner, a partner for a brief time. Many more commissions for residential work came in subsequent years, although many were never built. In 1947, however, Esherick designed the two boldly modeled Metcalf vacation houses at Lake Tahoe, which began attracting attention to his work. The houses' barn-like silhouettes—part of the regional vernacular—employ broad, gabled facades with recessed porches defined by large, unpeeled redwood-trunk columns.

In 1949, Esherick and Becky designed a larger house for their growing family in Kentfield, also in Marin County. Employed again was a simple, broad-faced gable, with a shallow plan, the ridge running the short rather than the long way of a typical barn-form. Becky, who still lives in the house, says the design was hers: "Joe's great contribution was urging the orientation of the glassy facade away from Mt. Tamalpais [a Marin county landmark] and toward the great oak tree. I'm very grateful for that," she says. The earth-hovering, barn-like form, echoing the work of Bay Area pioneers Maybeck and Schweinfurth, as well as the Metcalf houses, dominates the composition fore and aft. Six years later, the low-slung barn form appeared again in Kentwoodlands, but with shingle siding and a freestanding redwood pergola running the length of the garden-side terrace.

In 1951, Esherick was asked to design an urban residence for Mr. and Mrs. Richard Gold-



Left: The Esherick House in Ross, Calif. (1941), was the first example of the strategy Esherick calls "packing the box"; plan (below).



Above: The Metcalf House (1948), with its unpeeled redwood columns, was one of a pair of houses at Lake Tahoe, Calif., designed in 1947, that brought Esherick wider notice.



Left: Esherick House (1950) in Kentfield, Calif., focuses views on an old oak.



Above right: Esherick's Goldman House (1951) forms an L around a landscaped, walled entry patio pushed up to the street corner. Like many of Esherick's clients, the Goldmans still live in the house; it is unchanged except for an updated kitchen

man on a corner lot in Pacific Heights, an historic district south of the Presidio. The flat-roofed two-story plan forms an L on two sides of a landscaped, walled entry patio pushed up to the street corner. Light and views are gathered through large white, double-hung windows and expanses of wood "factory sash" built of sugar pine. The interior is marked by a soaring, pristine shaft of space at the entrance that reinterprets a local Victorian device for uniting two floors.

Through the '50s, Esherick continued his commitment to space-packed volumes with an emphasis on the vertical, but, as he puts it, in the latter part of the decade he "shifted metaphorically into reverse" and "unpacked" the box. He wanted the functional parts of these buildings to speak as visually autonomous parts, expressive of the plan's workings. The 1958 McIntyre house in Hillsborough, south of San Francisco, was the first important result of this altered approach. It is a series of easily identifiable, hip-roofed pavilion blocks clustered around a lofty solarium volume with a fully skylighted roof. There was an idiosyncratic, sculptured elegance to the composition, rich with architectural thrust and retreat, return and reveal. As Esherick says, it led to the Cary house of 1960.

The compact, two-story Cary house in Mill Valley harks back to the "packed-box" of the '40s and '50s, but with a sculptural massing reflecting the plan's workings. It perches on a hillside like the 1941 house in Ross but part of the shed-

roofed second-floor—sloping sympathetically with the hill—cantilevers five feet over a rambling deck. On the house's opposite side, the turn of the stair landing pushes out of the sheer, shingled exterior as a projecting "saddlebag" (a term that gained currency in the mid-'60s after the first Sea Ranch buildings were completed). Esherick, using a favorite word, calls it a much more "ordinary" house than the expressionist McIntyre house. But the Cary house is extraordinary for the way the wood-sheathed interiors contain a dynamic play of light. The seemingly casual fenestration is actually carefully orchestrated to produce the desired sequence of shifting, lambent light washing honey-hued surfaces. Esherick's rough-sawn version of California's characteristic arbor does its own particular job of creating slow, sweeping shadow on wall and floor panes.

Another house with blood-ties to the Cary house is the Bermak house of 1961, notable not only for its gravity-defying perch on a precipice high in the Oakland hills, but for the method Esherick used in developing the design. For a year, Dr. and Mrs. Bermak met once a week at Esherick's office. Bermak, a psychiatrist, says, "Joe would make a great analyst; my wife and I were newly married and we all talked while we ate and he made upside-down diagram sketches for us on the opposite side of the table, leading us through to a knowledge about ourselves and the kind of house we really wanted."

In 1955, William Wurster was instrumental in securing for Esherick his first campus commission, a modest facility for *The Pelican*, the U.C. Berkeley humor magazine. In his design, Esherick adroitly paid homage to Bernard Maybeck, the aging dean of Bay Area architecture, whose venerated Christian Science Church stood only a short distance away. Originally the *Pelican* job was to go to Maybeck, but Maybeck's wife vetoed this, concerned about the 89-year-old's health; Maybeck did help Esherick unofficially through the building's design development.

In the mid-'60s, two commissions brought national attention to Esherick and his associates (which now included future partners George Homsey, Peter Dodge, and Charles Davis). The first, *The Cannery*, was an early adaptive reuse project, and was highly successful—both commercially and critically. A half-block, multistory 19th-century canning factory was gutted and refitted with contemporary design components in a way that exalted the "ordinariness" of the red-brick shell. Esherick and his partners devised a complex of levels, terraces, and angular flow pat-



Left: With the McIntyre House (1958), Esherick says he "shifted metaphorically into reverse" and "unpacked" the box, to make the functional parts of his buildings visually autonomous, expressive of the plan's workings. The house is a series of easily identifiable, hip-roofed pavilion blocks clustered around a lofty solarium.

© 1958 Esherick

Below, far left: McIntyre House plan



Left and bottom: The two-story Cary House in Mill Valley (1960) recalls Esherick's "packed-box" of the '40s and '50s, but with a sculptural massing reflecting the plan's workings.

© 1960 Esherick

terms that retained the integrity of a utilitarian building distinguished by its varied ranges of segmental arches.

Writing in *Architectural Forum* a few years later, Esherick said: "The problem was the production of a commercially successful center in the middle of a city. Unlike suburban shopping centers which have space to sprawl, this one had to rise vertically and people must know immediately there is an up; people must see other people moving up and then they must see other people up there." Charles Moore later compared The Cannery to the Japanese tea ceremony, in which "ordinary" objects are the most coveted. "In the case of the Cannery, Joseph Esherick is the tea



© 1958 Esherick



Above: The Bemark House (1962) in the hills of Oakland, Calif.

Right: The Pelican Building (1955), Esherick's first U.C. Berkeley commission; his design is a homage to the work of Bernard Maybeck.



Bottom: Maybeck's Mathewson House, Berkeley (1916)



master, who presses the super-aristocratic ritual of understatement," Moore wrote.

Around the same time, Esherick and his small crew were asked to join the team planning and designing buildings for an unusual development 100 miles up the Pacific coast: Sea Ranch. The developers wanted a second-home community with a sensitivity to the ecology and the vernacular architectural tradition. Landscape architect Lawrence Halprin of San Francisco master planned the acreage and chose Esherick, by then the most respected interpreter of the Bay Area tradition, and Charles Moore, 40 years old and newly appointed chairman of U. C. Berkeley's Department of Architecture, as architects.

Esherick's firm, then called Joseph Esherick and Associates, was asked to design a general store and develop the first cluster of freestanding houses. "We looked for the most hostile building site on the property," Esherick says, "thinking if the buildings worked there, then others could succeed." Esherick chose an exposed point of land, near the shore, as the site for a group of houses woven into one of the cypress hedgerows. Moore's firm, M.L.T.W., was given the job of designing a 10-unit condominium on a prominent bluff jutting into the ocean.

Esherick and his staff used Halprin's ecology study, particularly the wind patterns, and designed simple plans with shallow shed roofs sloping on their leeward sides to provide outdoor areas protected from the offshore wind. The weathered shingle exteriors hug the ground and, with their sod-covered roofs, now seem to almost disappear. Moore and his partners, in their condominium project, saw the architects' responsibility to be, in Moore's words, "not a marriage of buildings and land but more of a limited partnership." The condominiums' great sloping roofs echo the site's slope and the flush, redwood skin weathered grey and then black like the nearby rocky shore, but the structure's silhouette of opposing shed-shapes and projecting wall bays stake a territorial claim to its site. It wasn't the first shed-roof assemblage in those years but it became the transcendent example in its spectacular setting. Esherick and Moore were joined at Sea Ranch as co-practitioners of regional vernacular; one's buildings were dug in and absorbed by the site, the other's design was dramatic and site-claiming.

In 1965, a new home for architecture, planning, and allied disciplines was completed on the Berkeley campus and named for William and Catherine Bauer Wurster. In 1959, Esherick had been asked

by the university to join Vernon DeMars, Donald Olsen, and Donald Hardison in designing the new building. Dean Wurster hoped that the group of four, with their differing views, would, through a deliberate process of synthesis, produce a building of distinction. In general, Esherick's views—and one could surmise Wurster's—led the design team in a painstaking analysis of needs from which the design emerged.

What evolved was a multistory concrete structure of rational functionalism, but not without the virtue of some pleasant massing of a slab tower and lower, flanking wings. The building's raw prominence at the foot of the Berkeley hills and its rather freewheeling Corbusian fenestration struck a dissonant chord on the sedate, romantic, and eclectically tile-roofed campus. Conceived from the inside out, the new building possesses, on all but its north side, a uniform language of horizontal concrete sunshades that knits the diversely fenestrated facades together. A cantilevered, nose-like balcony at the top of the hole-punched tower is a quirky but welcome humanizing note similar to The Cannery's elevator penthouse (which cantilevers over an open shaft). The interiors are aggressively utilitarian with exposed mechanical systems anchored against the concrete structure above wall panels of raw fir plywood.

In 1972, Joseph Esherick and Associates became Esherick Homsey Dodge and Davis. In the '50s, U.C. Berkeley graduate George Homsey had joined the small firm. Peter Dodge and Charles Davis, who joined the firm in 1959 and 1962, had each been students of Esherick's at Berkeley. Although the scope of EHDD's commissions has increased through the years to include projects like the complex, prize-winning Monterey Bay Aquarium of 1984 as well as many university buildings, there has always been work on residences.

One 1979 residence, in Marin County's Kentfield, was for artist Dan Romano and his wife Reva. It is a shingle-walled longitudinal plan that snakes with angular inflections along the sloping site's contour line. Beneath its shed roof, the house's massing shifts down and up the hill's slope. Topologically, it is a strung-out Cary House. It is responsive in different ways to a unique client and site, but with a similar choreography of light-activated interiors: Various windows in wall and roof (arranged ad hoc) embellish the sensuous life of light within the house in a luxurious yet subtle way.

Esherick had begun teaching in the department of architecture at the University of Califor-

nia in Berkeley in 1952 when he was 38. What started as an eight-week job filling in for his friend Vernon DeMars turned, at the urging of then Dean William Wurster, into a 33-year association with the school. He taught at Berkeley until 1985, serving as chairman of the School of Architecture from 1977 to 1981.



For the General Store (above) and Hedgerow Houses at Sea Ranch (left) of 1964, Esherick "looked for the most hostile building site on the property," he says, "thinking if the buildings worked there, then others could succeed." The buildings' design draws on Lawrence Halprin's earlier ecological site study.

Left: The Cannery in San Francisco (1965), a commercially and critically successful adaptive-use project, brought specialized retail to an urban site.

In the late '60s, Max Levy, now an architect in Dallas, studied under Esherick at Berkeley and, after graduation, worked briefly in the Esherick office. "I never saw Joe pick up a pencil or heard him talking about architecture or about light or form or space. Instead, he would talk about anthropology or sociology or politics or literature, and somehow, through all this, you got his feelings about architecture."

Esherick has found the novels of James Joyce and E. M. Forster as well as the writings of English poet and critic Stephen Spender to be particularly relevant to design, he says. "In Forster's novels, the stories are laid out simply and pleasantly and then suddenly something unexpected happens. I think our successful buildings are pleasant, logical arrangements intensified by the unexpected spatial or formal surprise, an embodiment of the way things are in life." He also equates design with comedy: "You set someone up here, and then the punch line is over there. That sudden abrupt flip can be a revelation, or a Joycean epiphany—which is close to what architecture is. . . . Let me assure you that we don't have sessions here in the office where we have readings from *Finnegan's Wake*, but the ideas are there."

In "Timelessness and Change," a speech he gave during the mid-'80s Esherick made the following observations: "We need to maintain a sense of humor, not just in case we are wrong, but to help us understand and deal with differences of opinion. And in more specific terms we need not just sense of place but a sense of humanity. The timelessness of architects' concern for the aesthetic environment, for beauty, for a lively and spirited grace can be enhanced by a strengthened commitment to the humanitarian foundations of architecture."

Within a period of seven years, Joseph Esherick received the Educator of the Year Award, the Firm of the Year Award, and the Gold Medal. This grand-slam of recognition makes Esherick unique in the profession's award annals and does honor to his principles of restraint, reason, and humanitarian idealism.

Maybe Joseph Esherick's contribution to architecture is best explained in these words he once wrote: "Beauty is a consequential thing, a by-product of solving problems correctly. No successful architecture can be formulated on a generalized system of aesthetics; it must be based on a way of life."

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Frank D. Welch, AIA, winner of many regional and state design awards, is an architect practicing in Dallas.



Top: Wurster Hall, U.C. Berkeley (1964), is a tough presence on its eclectic campus.

The Romano House (1979), Kentfield, Calif.: the box "unpacked" along a spectacular site (above); site plan (left)