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book review of

The Poetic Home: Designing the 19th-Century Domestic Interior by
Stefan Muthesius

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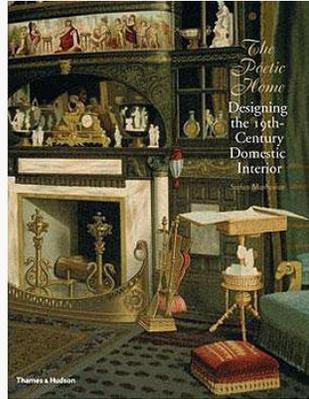
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Stefan Muthesius,
The Poetic Home: Designing the 19th-Century Domestic Interior.
London: Thames and Hudson, 2009.
352 pp, 120 color illus; 176 b/w illus; bibliography; index.
\$80.
ISBN 978-0-500-51419-1

The Poetic Home: Designing the 19th-Century Domestic Interior is one of several analytical studies of the history of nineteenth-century interior design that have appeared in the past decade. These include but are not limited to Judith W. Neiswander, *The Cosmopolitan Interior: Liberalism and the British Home, 1870–1914* (2000), Charles Rice, *The Emergence of the Interior: Architecture, Modernity, Domesticity* (2007), and Charlotte Gere, *Artistic Circles: Design and Decoration in the Aesthetic Movement* (2010), to name only a few. Published in 2009 and beautifully produced by Thames and Hudson, *The Poetic Home* is a summation of, and elaboration on, the writings on nineteenth-century interior design by Stefan Muthesius, an architectural historian well known for his work on nineteenth- and twentieth-century British and German architecture.

Based on his study of numerous and varied nineteenth-century European and American sources related to interior design and furnishings, both textual and visual, Muthesius explores the emerging notions of 'effect' and 'mood' in the nineteenth-century conception of domestic interiors. His book is about producers as well as beholders and consumers of interiors, and he argues that whatever meaning they hold is generated by both. The author sees the history of nineteenth-century interior decoration as one that moves from conventional (neoclassical) decors at the beginning of the nineteenth century to 'poetic' interiors in which environments were tailored to bring about a certain aura or ambiance that envelops those who live in them. It is not until the late nineteenth century and the beginning of Modernism that, according to the author, the 'interiority' of nineteenth-century domestic decors comes to be scorned and a demand arises for homes that look out to a wider community and the outdoors.^[1]

The book is organized thematically, moving from the practical (the various decorative trades, shops, and books and periodicals on interior design) via the conceptual (the preoccupation of architects, designers, and artists with the "unified", meaningful interior and the means—style,

color, and form--to achieve it), to the perception of the interior by the imagined as well as the real user. Though it covers the whole of the nineteenth century, the emphasis is on the period from the 1820s through the 1870s, the decades that Peter Thornton, in his classic book on the domestic interior, referred to as the "period of great domesticity."^[2] During this period, which coincides with the long shadow cast over the nineteenth century by Romanticism, the interest in 'mood' and 'atmosphere,' developed from a growing preoccupation with the home as a place at once of intimate togetherness with family and friends, and of refuge from the exterior world. The increasing number of specialized rooms in the house—boudoirs, studies, smoking rooms, libraries, bedrooms—encouraged a new psychic 'interiority' as it allowed for solitary withdrawal and private contemplation. The poetic home, therefore, assumed a central role in people's inner lives as the locus of the "fleeting moments...[from which] the agenda of life is composed." ^[3]

Muthesius's concept of the poetic home accommodates a variety of styles and forms and is especially useful as a framework for the interest in various revivalist styles. The author's term 'poeticized ethnicity' covers at once the fascination with exotic styles: Chinese, Japanese, Moorish, Indian, which were capable of creating specific moods appropriate for anterooms, boudoirs, or smoking rooms; and the 'high' and vernacular revivals of the 1870s and 1880s, that led to the nationalist fashions of Old-English, Neo-Rococo, or Colonial Revival—more appropriate for halls, living, and dining rooms.

Muthesius takes great interest in the terminology used in nineteenth-century writings on interior design and many of his chapters are loosely organized around specific terms. In the introduction, he discusses the terms 'comfort' and 'décor.' As for the first, he understands it as a concept going far beyond convenience (*i.e.*, modern plumbing, central heating) to combine at once physical and psychological qualities. The size of the rooms, their separate functions, warmth, light, even locks on the door, all were matters of physical comfort, as was softness—of rugs, upholstered furniture, etc. Psychologically, he relates the notion of comfort to the experience of coziness or *gemütlichkeit*. 'Décor' had a very different connotation, less bound up with psychological states and more with social status. Like personal dress, home décor was a clear manifestation of wealth and one's position in society.

In chapter I, Muthesius discusses the use of the word 'poetry' in nineteenth-century writings on the home. The author makes the point that, while in the eighteenth century the house is considered too lowly to be considered poetic (*cf.*, Etienne-Louis Boullée "With houses ... it is difficult to introduce the poetry of architecture"), in the nineteenth century, the terms poetry and poetic are frequently applied to the home.^[4] This development may be linked to the Romantic movement which allowed for the possibility that the everyday and ordinary could become poetic. Of course, as Muthesius argues, by the end of the nineteenth century, this poeticizing of the trivial often degenerates into sentimentality, and as such, comes to be rejected by Modernism, which together with the poetry also rejects the comfort and décor of nineteenth-century homes.

In chapters II and III, Muthesius discusses the complexity of the production of interiors, in which dozens of different craftsmen were involved, as well as the related problem of creating harmony and unity in interiors, especially at a time when the profession of 'interior designer' had not yet been created. Two main avenues of creating harmony were color and form, the

latter including line and surface. An important new idea that was introduced in the 1830s was that of the 'picturesque' interior, which was marked by studied disorder. "Chairs, sofas, stools, chiffonniers, articles of *vertu*, a few elegantly bound books, vases for flowers, musical instrument, with other articles of refinement, taste, and ornament should be strewn about in most picturesque disorder," wrote the British architect Edward Buckton Lamb in 1834.^[5] It was thought that the overall 'painterly' quality of the Romantic interior could give it a unity that was lacking in the carefully separated groupings of the neoclassical interior.

Chapter IV deals specifically with the 'atmosphere' or *Stimmung* of the home, *i.e.*, the effect it was to have on the user. It is here that Muthesius introduces the notion of the house as a 'domestic idyll,' a place of retreat and contemplation. How could atmosphere be created? Muthesius discusses some design strategies in particular: the creation of little nest-like enclosures in the house (bay windows, inglenooks, canopied settees, etc.) and the deliberate creation of shadowy spaces.

Perhaps the most interesting chapter of the book is chapter V, which focuses on the character of the house. It deals with the various styles—Renaissance, Rococo, Gothic, Oriental, and the significance they had in their time (and place). The author is particularly interested in national and vernacular revivals and the related concept of the "old," with its connotations of history and the "good old times." Old-English, Altdeutsch, *Oud-Hollandsch*, Old Colonial, all were expressions of a nostalgia for a national past that could still be found intact in backward areas of the countryside, and therefore had the aura of the preindustrial, the authentic, and the natural. By the 1870s, the interest in the countryside led to what Muthesius calls an "international vernacular revivalism," that is closely linked to the emerging interest in folk art and lore of the time. Vernacular rooms were exhibited at international exhibitions and began to be collected by new ethnographic museums such as *Skandinavisk-etnografiska samlingen* (later the *Nordic Museum* (*Nordiska Museum* or *Nordiska museet*), founded by Arthur Hazelius in Stockholm in 1873.

In the final chapter, Muthesius deals with the "real" rather than the imagined user. This is a bit of a disparate chapter, but the most important concept that is introduced in it is that of 'memory,' the notion that houses, their interiors, and the objects in them all carry memories. The rejection of the old that sets in with Modernism also means ignoring the importance of the multiple significances that "old" objects have for their users.

The Poetic Home is not an easy read, *not* because the author uses difficult technical or theoretical language but because his thematic approach causes him to jump back and forth in time in chronological moves that are not always easy to follow, especially because (ironically, no doubt, to enhance readability), he frequently substitutes precise dates by vague temporal terms such as "traditionally," "then," "earlier," "later," etc. The particular thematic approach that he has chosen also leads to a certain degree of repetition. Nonetheless, a close reading of the text is rewarding and reveals numerous original and interesting observations and ideas. The value of the book, moreover, lies not only in the text, but also in the numerous illustrations, for the most part reproducing pictures in books and magazine articles in interior decoration. These images are only loosely related to the text (which only seldom refers to them directly) but their explanatory captions form, as it were, a second narrative. For students of interior decoration of the nineteenth century, they form a valuable trove of pictorial material.

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Notes

[1] Muthesius's dual definition of "interiority," as both human subjectivity and an approach to architecture that is turned inward, is indebted to Susan Sidlauskas, *Body, Place, and Self in Nineteenth-Century Painting* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Sidlauskas argues that there are "two different kinds of interiors: the body and the house," and that subjectivity or psychological interiority came into being in the nineteenth-century bourgeois domestic interior, itself the product of architectural interiority. 2, 20.

[2] Peter Thornton, *Authentic Decor: The Domestic Interior 1620 – 1920* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1984), 216.

[3] Charles Blanc, *Grammaire des arts décoratifs: Décoration intérieure de la maison* (Paris: Renouard, 1882), 74.

[4] Etienne-Louis Boullée, *Treatise on Architecture*, trans. and ed., H. Rosenau (London: Tiranti, 1952), 68.

[5] Edward B. Lamb, "Villa in the Norman Style," *Architectural Magazine* 2 (1834), 337–38.