

My MacGuffin – Discussions around a cabinet

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An architect's journey to design buildings is often peppered with rejected design iterations. But what if this work is given a new lease of life? If they are allowed a presence in the public realm, and are assembled as collections where unrelated work be placed beside each other to unfold new meanings - questions even, of the juggling design development journey for an architect, and to be contained in carcasses of specifically articulated cabinets? That the cabinet is a comment, or reflection, of what it contains and becomes a medium for communicating and influencing beyond the contained? This paper discusses therefore the real and ephemeral qualities embedded in a cabinet as a carcass for containment.

'Yvonne, will thou have Wendel to thy wedded object, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Wilt thou love it, comfort it, honour and keep it, in sickness and in health, until death do you part?'

'yes, I will.'

Wendel, will thou have Yvonne to your wedded wife, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Wilt thou love it, comfort it, honour and keep it, in sickness and in health, until death do you part?'

(flap opens, and the word JA appears)

'You can now exchanges the rings. I declare you cabinet and wife.'¹

In the summer of 1992 the artist Yvonne Drøge Wendel married Wendel, a cabinet that was in her mother's bedroom where her mother kept her jewelry and other beloved items. Yvonne subsequently took Wendel's name, and they both embarked on a honeymoon trekking on donkeys in Portugal. Apparently the curve of the cabinet front sat well balanced on the donkey's curvaceous back. They have been happily married for 25 years. Wendel decided to marry her mother's cabinet as a reaction and comment to the way artefacts are perceived in our society. 'Artefacts are too often perceived merely in terms of clichéd concepts of sentimental value, meaning, identity and authenticity. But things do more. They are determining forces in human behaviour and thinking. They shape us as much as we shape them. A better understanding of what things actually do will enrich how we design and produce, as well as influence all areas of human life..... what is needed is a more refined understanding of our relations with things and a commitment to enrich one another's existence'².

Yvonne Drøge Wendel has been the head of fine art at The Gerrit Rietveld Academie of applied sciences for Fine Arts and Design in Amsterdam, and her marriage statement comments on the very way we relate to things and what artefacts actually do to us. Her approach is to highlight and promote care and respect for objects around us, and to be aware of how they actually shape us. Don't we all, in one form or another, have artefacts – cabinets – that are of sentimental value, in our possession? Objects that have come from an event, or an older generation, that have either a symbolic value, or have been with us for so long they embed a history of who we are and where we have come from? But as Wendel writes, although they give meaning, identity and authenticity even, they can also become benchmarks into the way we are – our behaviour and our thinking. They shape us as much as they are containers for our belongings.

A Cabinet for Turner..... from Ruskin

John Ruskin (1819-1900) was a British art critic and was an avid commentator of the Victorian Age. He was also probably the best patron and supporter of the artist J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851). In 1842 Turner met with his dealer, Thomas Griffiths and presented him with 15 sample watercolours. Turner proposed that Griffiths secure

¹ Macguffin magazine 5. The Cabinet. Married with Wendel, Veerie Spronck p125

² Macguffin magazine 5. The Cabinet. Married with Wendel, Veerie Spronck p125

10 commissions for him whereby he will paint large scaled watercolours to complete the set of work. Griffiths found only 3 purchasers, of which one of whom was Ruskin. They subsequently agreed he would buy all the set of 25 paintings. Ruskin was one of the first to recognize that light damages pigments in the paint, and if not protected, the colours will change and fade, so in 1861 he therefore commissioned Snell, William and Edward, cabinet makers in London, to build a cabinet to house the 25 watercolours. The cabinet was built to a specification and design akin to the aspirations of the Arts and Crafts movement. It is made from mahogany that has been polished to a shine and embossed in gold lettering. 'Mahogany cabinet with brass mounts and ivory plaques, with five removable vertical cases, each case containing five removable glazed oak frames for drawings. The top has a flange at the front inscribed in gold lettering 'WATER-COLOURS by J.M.W.TURNER, R.A./Given by JOHN RUSKIN, 1861.' The top is hinged 22 cm from the back edge, and has a flange at the front which is inscribed in gold lettering, below is a key hole. When pushed up, the top is supported by a hinged brass prop and ratchet in the top of the right side of the carcass. The carcass contains five removable vertical cases with handles of leather-covered metal on the top. These are numbered on the front with inlaid circular ivory disks, numbered respectively 1 to 5 in black. Each has a metal alloy latch-type fastening lower down on the front. Each case contains five removable glazed oak frames for drawings, grooved at the top and bottom to fit into runners in the boxes. Some retain a leather tab by which they were drawn out of the box'.³

Ruskin gave the cabinet, with contents, to Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, UK under the strict conditions that it is never lent outside the museum, and that when stored the cabinet and collection was to be kept safe from the damages of natural light. Although Ruskin's approach was to protect Turner's work there is clear evidence from the design alone that he was also creating a cabinet that would serve not only as a container, but also as a complementary frame to Turners paintings. He chose the richness and depth of colour in mahogany to frame the body of work, and glazed oak frames with leather tabs as frames to the paintings. Each painting can be safely removed from the cabinet and has identification marks for identifying its location in the box, evidence that the cabinet should serve a specific function. The oak frames for the paintings complement the colours in Turner's work and does not offer a strong contrast to distract the viewer, but rather accentuates the tones of the technique of watercolour wash over graphite and ink.

The well-crafted mahogany carcass communicates a deep respect for the contents inside. The cabinet can be seen beyond just a piece of furniture, but as a reflection of Ruskin's adoration for Turner's work and his commitment to protect the legacy, whereby there has been carefully considered design decisions of the artefact. The cabinet, like Wendel writes, can be seen as a refined 'understanding of our relations with things and a commitment to enrich one another's existence'⁴

The cabinet design and execution by Ruskin for Turner's watercolours shows how cabinets not only serve the practical role of containers for belongings, but potentially more importantly, demonstrate the container, or frame, can play a crucial role in embedding value and meaning to the contents the cabinet houses. In Ruskin's case the cabinet communicates a deep respect and understanding of Turner's work, together with acknowledging both the process of watercolour production – namely the layering of wash upon wash – but also the fragility of the work. The cabinet needed to be robust and protect the paintings.

To frame the work

Much can also be said of the choice of ornamented frames of the many paintings by Turner for his paintings. Each is a statement of intent that promotes a presence in its own right. Turner was conscious of how to contain his work. Maybe his early apprentice in architectural offices in London prompted an understanding of how architectural space can promote specific qualities of mood and atmosphere. He was deeply occupied with carefully considering solutions of his paintings presentation, and the frame became an artefact of attention.

'Fortuitously, his (Turner's) working life coincided with a decline in the art of hand-carving frames which began with the Napoleonic Wars and accelerated during the first half of the 19th century. The general movement at this time from workshop to factory production, the fluctuations in the economy, and the emergence of new middle- and lower middle-classes of consumer all had an effect upon the types of frames demanded, and those which were available. However, an examination of the remaining authentic examples, together with paintings which include

³ Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge UK. Object Number: **M.2-1861** (Applied Arts) (record id: 77246; input: 2002-11-20; modified: 2019-05-14). <http://data.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/id/object/77246>

⁴ Macguffin magazine 5. The Cabinet. Married with Wendel, Veerie Spronck p125

depictions of Turner's framed pictures, and contemporary comments, indicates that he employed carefully-considered solutions to the question of presentation.'⁵

Turner also wanted to dictate how his paintings were viewed, and so, in 1804 he converted some buildings attached to his house in Queen Anne Street, London, to his own gallery. 'The pictures were displayed in a single close-hung tier on the low red walls, another row propped beneath them on the floor. The effect is of a room almost completely paneled with paintings, so that very little of the wall-hangings appear, the frames acting like a grid of golden mortar. These low walls, together with the system of top-lighting by diffused daylight carefully worked out by Turner (probably with the help of Sir John Soane), meant that the deep frames required by Turner's relatively large works had no disadvantage of cast shadow; they existed solely to enhance the paintings. The diffused light was described by his executor, the Rev. William Kingsley: 'It was the best lighted gallery I have ever seen, and the effect got by the simplest means; a herring net was spread from end to end just above the walls, and sheets of tissue paper spread on the net, the roof itself being like that of a greenhouse...'⁶

In an exhibition at Tate Liverpool, entitled *The Sun is God: J.M.W. Turner*, in late 2000, the curator Mark Frances took the bold decision to exhibit a collection of Turner's paintings out of their frames. 'Fifty paintings from the last decade of Turner's life have been removed from their frames and hung, somewhat lower than usual, in entirely natural light. You see them as they might have been seen in the 1840s, specifically in Turner's own studio. Yet you also see them as startlingly live and direct, liberated from the antique frames, security glass and Soane-pink walls that force them back in time at the Clore Gallery in London. The contrast is there in every work: intensely vital images, still quick with the maker's mark, painted on the frail and aged canvas now exposed round the edge of each stretcher. As that light changes throughout the day, its passage is reflected in the paintings: a sea that looks as still as a field of mown hay begins to ruffle and shiver, icy skies thaw and glow, dying rays come up like wild fire. This isn't just some trick of the light, it is inherent in Turner's painting: all those millions of coloured touches add up to an ever-changing play of light - generally frozen in the steady glare of electric bulbs. In these conditions, you literally see more of Turner.'⁷

Here is an example of the effect of removing the container and setting out bare the contents. A new and sometimes raw experience awaits, with the comfort of the container to isolate and focus the view removed, meaning the play of daylight as it passes through the gallery in this instance suddenly becomes an actor needed to illuminate the work in new ways. So there becomes a search for the expected container/frame to be able to 'locate' the piece of art in question. A search for a frame, and/or an artefact. The manner of the way daylight was allowed to filter into the gallery spaces becomes the artefact for our desire to frame the work, even if it is ephemeral.

The MacGuffin

In creative disciplines such as writing and filmmaking one can also experience the paradox of both the necessity of framing activities and storylines, and simultaneously a desire to establish more ephemerally orientated attributes to illuminate in new ways a specific event or story. Angus MacPhail (1903-1962) was an English screenwriter best remembered for his work with Alfred Hitchcock. He is credited as the inventor of what he called the MacGuffin, a device, object or event that can drive a plot in works of fiction that is a motivation for the characters, but is insignificant, or even irrelevant in itself. A device that frames and locates specific dramas and stories. The use of such a device predates however MacPhail. The Holy Grail in Arthurian Legend is an example of the 'existence' of an invisible desired artefact serving to advance a fictional plot. Director and producer Alfred Hitchcock, working with MacPhail adopted the term MacGuffin and the technique He explained an example of the concept in a 1939 lecture at Columbia University in New York City: 'It might be a Scottish name, taken from a story about two men on a train. One man says, 'What's that package up there in the baggage rack?' And the other answers, 'Oh, that's a MacGuffin'. The first one asks, 'What's a MacGuffin?' 'Well,' the other man says, 'it's an apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands.' The first man says, 'But there are no lions in the Scottish

⁵ Turner's Picture Frames: Part 1. The Frame Blog <https://theframeblog.com/2013/03/06/turners-picture-frames-part-1/>

⁶ Turner's Picture Frames: Part 1. The Frame Blog <https://theframeblog.com/2013/03/06/turners-picture-frames-part-1/>

⁷ Laura Cumming <https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2000/jul/02/1>

Highlands,' and the other one answers, 'Well then, there's no MacGuffin!' So you see that a MacGuffin is actually nothing at all.'⁸

The Architect

If the MacGuffin is a device, an object or a circumstance that can drive a plot within a creative field that is a motivation, but is potentially irrelevant in itself, then we can make parallel observations in architecture. Although we set value on the quality of a buildings design and execution, the best skilled architect tends to be preoccupied in designing something that is there, but simultaneously not there at the same time. All the intents of the architect are spread bare at a buildings resolution, yet there is only a degree of dictatorship from the inventor when the building is put in to use. The architect does not have full control of how the spaces will be contained and used. So the art for the architect is to fabricate frames – cabinets even – whereby on the one hand the contained has more value and significance than the container, and on the other, the container illuminates and emphasizes specific moods, meaning and identity, and is a determining force in human behaviour and thinking. Buildings simply are able to dictate how one acts, and the good ones even influence how we feel. It is something there and not there at the same time, and becomes once again the artefact for our desire as a user, even if it is ephemeral. This is what makes the act of designing buildings a rich profession, full of contradictions, physical, real - and ephemeral at the same time.

But despite an architect's engagement in a spirit that has no physical presence in final building constructions – like the MacGuffin, something that drives the plot but irrelevant to the day to day activities within the building in itself, architecture is nevertheless a physical phenomenon where the profession, by and large, produce physical results of our design thoughts and developments. Buildings make collages of streets, clusters of spaces and frames for habitation and occupation. The carefully designed carcass, like Ruskin's cabinet for Turner's paintings, is a preoccupation of the architect as it is the physical result of a painstaking journey of design decisions and iterations.

Revisiting our MacGuffins

This journey for the architect and the quest for making a building of quality that contributes to the built environment is also a collage of design iterations whereby that journey produces frames in the form of drawings and models that are embedded with design intentions, thoughts and explorations. Through every project architects produce an archive of design iterations and tests that are often rich in content, curiosity and nerve, but nevertheless fail to see the light of day. Artefacts produced through design development and iterations contain not only scaled spatial tests but also design intentions and thoughts – warts and all. They show a journey of architectural intent through oceans of drawings, forests of models, films and substantial amounts of writings. Physical artefacts demonstrating the journey from idea to built form. They can often describe the quest for creating a carcass that can contain and inform something that may have a value beyond itself.

All of Alfred Hitchcock's films are evidence and conclusions of a long series of decisions and experiments. As scholars we scroll the archives to find further meaning in the works, to track and trace the thought process. But we stumble upon a rich array of forgotten, failed attempts of building moving images following the MacGuffin that have been rejected and tossed away. It is so also of the architect. The journey is peppered with rejected design iterations. But what if this work is given a new lease of life? Is allowed a presence in the public realm, and is assembled as collections where unrelated work even can be placed beside each other to unfold new meanings - questions even, of the juggling design development journey for an architect and the ephemeral bonds embedded in every iteration. And to be contained within a carcass we will refer to as a cabinet?

⁸ <https://the.hitchcock.zone/wiki/MacGuffin>