

PEEK-A-BOO VIEWS

Article in *NEST* magazine, Volume 10, Fall 2000

Text by Peter Wheelwright,

Photographs by Laurie Simmons

KALIDOSCOPE HOUSE WAS CREATED BY THE PHOTOGRAPHER LAURIE SIMMONS IN COLLABORATION WITH ARCHITECT PETER WHEELWRIGHT, A LONGTIME FRIEND, AND HIS ASSISTANT HERBIN NG. SIMMONS HAS BEEN REPEATEDLY DRAWN TO THE EERIE INTERIORS OF DOLLHOUSES WHEN STAGING HER PSYCHOLOGICALLY CHARGED DOMESTIC FEMALE TABLEAUX. THIS RAINBOW-SATURATED MINIATURE OFFERS THE KIND OF PERSONALIZED CONTEMPORARY SPACE IN WHICH SHE AND HER FAMILY ACTUALLY LIVE. IT WILL BE MARKETED BY BOZART TOYS, WHICH IS PROMOTING A LINE OF TOYS DESIGNED BY ARTISTS. QUITE LOGICALLY, SIMMONS AND WHEELWRIGHT HAVE DECIDED TO INCLUDE THEMSELVES AS DOLLS. ARE WE NOT ALWAYS BOTH THE PRODUCERS AND PRODUCTS OF THE SPACES WE OCCUPY?



I feel a certain eerie pleasure in finding myself wedded in dollhood to Laurie Simmons. As the plastic mother and father figurines soon to take up residence in the fantasy world of the Kaleidoscope House, which in our real world embodiment we designed for the Bozart Toy company, our shared interests in domesticity seem to have brought us to a most peculiar and unexpected place.

It should surprise no one familiar with Laurie's photography that the idea to design a "modernist" dollhouse was entirely hers. Although, as a modern architect, I share with Laurie a mystified wonderment at the stalled nature of dollhouse design, Laurie has an even greater stake—she's been running out of props. Consequently, when Larry Mangel, the congenial aesthete, who a few years back re-directed his interest in art from dealer to toy-maker, approached her with the proposal to design a toy for his line of "Toys by Artists", Laurie was unequivocal. The opportunity to situate her domestic female tableaux within the kind of personalized contemporary architectural space that she and her family (the painter, Carroll Dunham, and their two girls) inhabit was irresistible. For her, the life of the home is inevitably playful and fantastic; as her work has always suggested, we are all dolls placed hither and fro within and according to the social matrix that determines domesticity. But while the idea for a dollhouse was clear, its architecture was not. She called her architect.

Laurie and I have known each other since graduate school and our families are intertwined, alternating the births of our respective children, sharing schools and vacations, and generally living out our lives in New York City in affectionate syncopation for the past 20 years. During this time, I have designed her domestic space no fewer than three times...and we are still friends. My initial thoughts about this project were filled with doubt. I too found the project irresistible but was unnerved by the client. The problem was trying to figure out who exactly it was? Unlike the conventional architectural project where the client is clearly identified and the functional program clearly delineated to address specific needs and desires, the concerns of Bozart Toys, the Artist, and the Architect were entangled in a very different web of relationships. An arbiter was needed who could cut through vested interests, egos, and the contrary ways of working that always appear in collaborative projects. Laurie and I turned to our children...the Kaleidoscope Kids.

Both Laurie and I have always had our studios in close proximity to our homes. The unwitting victims of a life-style choice, my three children have grown up surrounded by the architectural models of “modernist” residential projects which my office has produced over the years. A few of these models, unbeknownst to the client, have in fact had a second life as dollhouses in the family playroom. In Laurie’s home, the miniature ensembles of female dolls negotiating huge worlds of domestic and other social spaces were, “between takes”, simply her kids’ quirky little toys—re-combined and situated according to their play. It is only natural, given their inadvertent complicity in our work, that our children should be the source of inspiration for the Kaleidoscope House.

Framed in colored transparent polycarbonate “glass”, the dollhouse is unusual in that it has four sides, each of which allows a view and access into the interior rooms. As the exterior walls of the dollhouse slide open and overlap one another, their colors change in hue and value along the spectrum of complementary color. Viewing the interior through and against these constantly shifting relationships of color and light gives the domestic arrangements of furniture and dolls a surprising range of appearances. To facilitate this aspect of the dollhouse, we designed the base to rotate 360 degrees.

The plan of the house is conventional in “modern” terms. An open kitchen looks on to a double height living/dining area. A home office (complete with faux computer ports) and a carport, (or screened porch depending on the position of the sliding walls) make up the rest of the first floor. A center stair takes the doll to a curved mezzanine, overlooking the living room and fireplace. At each end of the mezzanine, a bedroom with built-in loft beds and Simmons-designed wallpaper and rugs flank a shared bathroom, all situated beneath the swooping curve of the blue roof directly overhead. Skylights in the removable roofs provide top down views and colored shafts of light into the interior.

This is not a house for Barbie. The fixed sociality and domestic practices of the Barbie dolls, with their coy relationships to publicity and privacy (not to mention their political-correctness benignly concealing an assimilationist conservatism), would require quite an adjustment in the transparent, flexible and minimal open plan of this dollhouse. The Kaleidoscope House’s accessory kits of eclectic contemporary furniture selected by Laurie and “classic” International Style pieces can be arranged in a number of ways beneath a child’s personally curated collection of mini-artworks by Peter Halley, Carroll Dunham, Mel Kendrick, and others hanging along the mezzanine wall. So who are the dolls that will occupy this dollhouse? Laurie and I mulled this over quite a bit before

realizing that we should put our money where our mouths are. Are we not always both the producers and products of the spaces we occupy? I haven't seen the final dolls yet but I believe I come 6 1/4 inches tall, perhaps in Corbu glasses; Laurie, a half-inch shorter, in downtown couture. Watch for the Kaleidoscope Kids forthcoming.