MORE, MORE, MOORE!

Architect Charles Moore describes the eighth house he's built for himself—the crowded center of a crowded life

Sometimes architects have at hand an extraordinary opportunity to test their most evanescent and unprovable (that is to say, slippery) notions about space or light or color or fit or function. The opportunity comes in their own houses, with minimum penalties if the evanescent notions slither out of hand. This house in Austin is the eighth I have done for myself and presumably one of the last. It is larger than others I have made for myself and considerably more comfortable, more inhabitable, than its predecessors.

Inhabiting, as I claim from lecterns everywhere, is a basic human need, not far behind eating and sleeping, though far less universally achieved. It involves a place of one's own, a center of one's universe, where one has that feeling of well-being dancers call being centered. The architect's task is not to make or purify some abstraction, but rather to design a stage for the centered inhabitant, for him or her or them to act out their lives. "Bah! This is
Most of the remodeling was selective erasure, which left the critical act of adding something.

Moore’s inspirations for his own house, top, include the pool at architect Geoffrey Bawa’s office in Colombo, Sri Lanka, center, and the wagon entrance to the Sherwood Ranch in Salinas, California, above.
The curving wall of the entry corridor continues into the living room. Totemic pilasters contain niches for kachina dolls and are topped by primitive masks. The ceiling, says Moore, "is painted almost white in restful contrast to the hubbub elsewhere."

For the living room I kept remembering the lift of wide stairs at Bantry House in west Ireland.
The warriors' chests are open to reveal various wonders, including giant kachinas my sister makes me for Christmas. Long before the armorial pilasters were finished, though, the curved wall was evoking responses. I note a positive one from Hal Box, who is the dean of the architecture school at Austin: "It's like canoeing along the steep bank of a curving stream toward a point out of sight. I like canoeing, so I like this." The curved wall swings around past the fireplace to the view out over the oak trees. Up a few steps is a seating corner that looks out through the giant window to the courtyard, where wisteria will soon spread summertime shadow.

The removal of the ceilings revealed the underside of the roof, which is complex, contradictory, and mostly just confused and which I like to think is a suitable foil to the single-minded sweep of the enveloping ellipse. Also, it is painted almost white in restful contrast to the hubbub elsewhere. The floor is the original 1936 wood and 1949 concrete with the handsome patterns of mastic left after the green asphalt tile was peeled off and with a net of colors in a pattern of squares and circles painted over it all to camouflage some of the more serious disasters. On it are kilims. The biggest rug in front of the fireplace, brought home from a London antiques store when the dollar was up, provides the color scheme for the rest of the room.

On the high wall, facing an area for dining, hang my great-great-grandparents Moore, whom I first remember hanging in my grandfather's stair hall in Michigan. They have moved to California twice with me and to Connecticut not very far from the town in Vermont where they started, and now they seem to take in Texas with the same equanimity with which they faced the rest.

A fine Baltic plywood is the material for the sofa in the dining area, locally built. The design is the first in a series that owes something to Karl Friedrich Schinkel and a host of Biedermier designers as well as to really good plywood.

The fireplace in the elliptical wall received no more than several coats of paint and a new tile hearth. Above it is an overmantel meant to house a few objects and to filter light from an upper window. It is presently made of Fome-Cor to simplify the numerous changes we'll make before we get it just the way we want it, whereupon it will be recut in everlasting plywood.

The kitchen is worth a note: the original was well made, but narrow and tight. We retained the side with sink, dishwasher, refrigerator, and cabinets, and demolished the opposite wall, which included a stove. That became an island counter with a cooking top that extends to the elliptical wall, and additional cabinets were built along the outside wall of what had been the dining room. Everything old and new was then covered with a marbleized laminate, which makes the kitchen an acceptable neighbor to the living room.

Through a door just left of the entrance is my study/dressing room, bedroom, and bath with a giant shower, which is the only addition to the original house. The shower is bright with a translucent roof, walls of metal roofing, and duckboard flooring. A sliding glass door separates the shower and bedroom and lights up the bedroom with a bright and even glow. Adjoining the shower is the remodeled bath, the one place where I allowed myself some fancy surfaces: stainless-steel counter, nickel lavatory, black faucets. And on the walls of bathroom, bedroom, and study, as well as living room, are shelves jammed with books and objects. The books are very tidy, but the whole house is filled with objects—awash with objects—and that is its most notable characteristic.

From earliest youth I have collected things that appealed to me: miniature buildings and figures and objects, puppets and cars and ornaments, kachina dolls and pictures—mostly toys. They are souvenirs of places I've been, they form pieces of miniature cities or of little scenes with staggering contrasts of scale. I used to see myself as a pack rat, and only lately has anyone called me a collector. So the next step is to figure out how to insinuate into this house miracles of organization: vitrines, glass-top tables, and new ways to look at little objects made into miniature worlds. If I don't take charge, they will. Or maybe they have.

Architecture Editor: Elizabeth Sverbejeff Byron

Moore's love of 'little objects made into miniature worlds' is reflected in an installation he designed for an exhibition of toys at his Hood Museum at Dartmouth College.