

accidentalarchivist

Dreams That CHAIRS Are Made Of

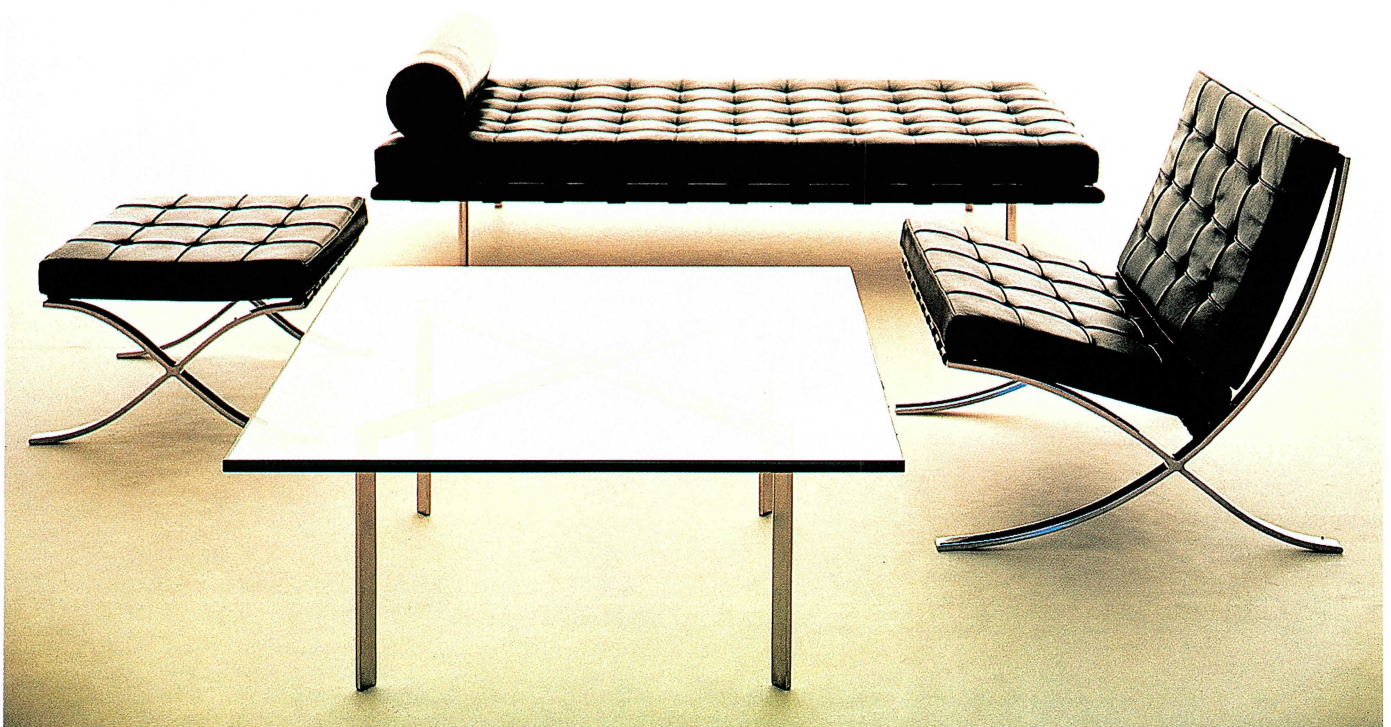
A Modernist house starts manifesting at the seat of power. Literally.

By George Smart

THE JOURNEY TO A MODERNIST HOUSE BEGINS ...

with a chair. Maybe it belonged to your mother. Or maybe it was left behind from the previous owner when you moved in (lucky you). It could be from an everything-is-connected-to-the-universe magical moment at a yard sale. You bought it cheap, for a song, as the expression goes. A lilting, beautiful song full of emotion, like Jennifer Warnes singing Leonard Cohen.

What is this mythically powerful chair? Perhaps it is a Barcelona chair designed by Mies van der Rohe and the usually uncredited Lilly Reich. It could be the 670 Lounge chair by Charles and Ray Eames or the Butterfly chair by Antonio Bonet, Juan Kurchan and Jorge Ferrari-Hardoy.



The chair is no simple sitting device. It has status. You refer to it as a proper noun. It is The Chair. And not just anyone's Chair. It's yours, and it is your favorite. Did you, a mere mortal, chose this Chair? No, grasshopper, The Chair chose you. It is destiny. You may share The Chair with others, but make no mistake, this is a special relationship. The Chair reminds you every time you sit in it or even walk by that one day you and the Chair will be living elsewhere—in a Midcentury Modernist house with hardwood floors, geometry efficiently using every square foot, light streaming in from everywhere, rooms that flow one into the other, and more Chairs to keep this one company.

The author Tom Wolfe died this year. He was internationally known for his wildly popular novels such as *The Right Stuff* and *Bonfire of the Vanities* and for his signature style of dress, usually a spotless white three-piece custom-made suit and two-tone shoes. He called it "Neo-pretentious."

Wolfe was less known, however, for a short book called *From Bauhaus to Our House*, published in 1981. Wolfe was a hardcore hater of Modernist design but unlike today's Internet trolls, he wrote about it brilliantly, excoriating Modernism and Modernist architects, architecture, and especially, The Chair,



PHOTO BY CHAD MELLON

Did you, a mere mortal, chose this Chair? No, grasshopper, **The Chair chose you.**

with wit and an inexhaustible flair. He particularly viewed the Barcelona chair as pretentious idol worship: "When you saw the holy object on the sisal rug, you knew you were in a household where a fledgling architect and his young wife had sacrificed everything to bring the symbol of the godly mission into their home." The Barcelona Chair was the avocado toast of furniture, surely forgotten after being outed as a fad. Tom Wolfe just didn't get it. The Barcelona Chair is now almost 90 years

old and one of the most enduring iconic chair designs in the world.

The Chair is a safe space for holding your Modernist dreams. One day, you will have more money, that next great job in a new city, or perhaps your next relationship (sigh). You and The Chair will be together standing proudly—I mean sitting proudly—in that dream house, listening to "Famous Blue Raincoat" with Jennifer Warnes singing Leonard Cohen. ☸

PHOTO COURTESY OF GEORGE SMART



George Smart founded NC Modernist Houses and USModernist Houses, together the largest open digital archives for residential Modernist architecture. He is host of the podcast USModernist Radio, which posts every other Monday on iTunes. www.usmodernist.org.