

INTIMACY EXPOSED Toilet, Bathroom, Restroom Edited by Javier Fernández Contreras and Roberto Zancan

COLUMN ISSUE 1



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ISSUE 1 (2023)

INTIMACY EXPOSED

Toilet, Bathroom, Restroom

Edited by Javier Fernández Contreras and Roberto Zancan

SPECTOR BOOKS
ISBN 978-3-95905-583-3

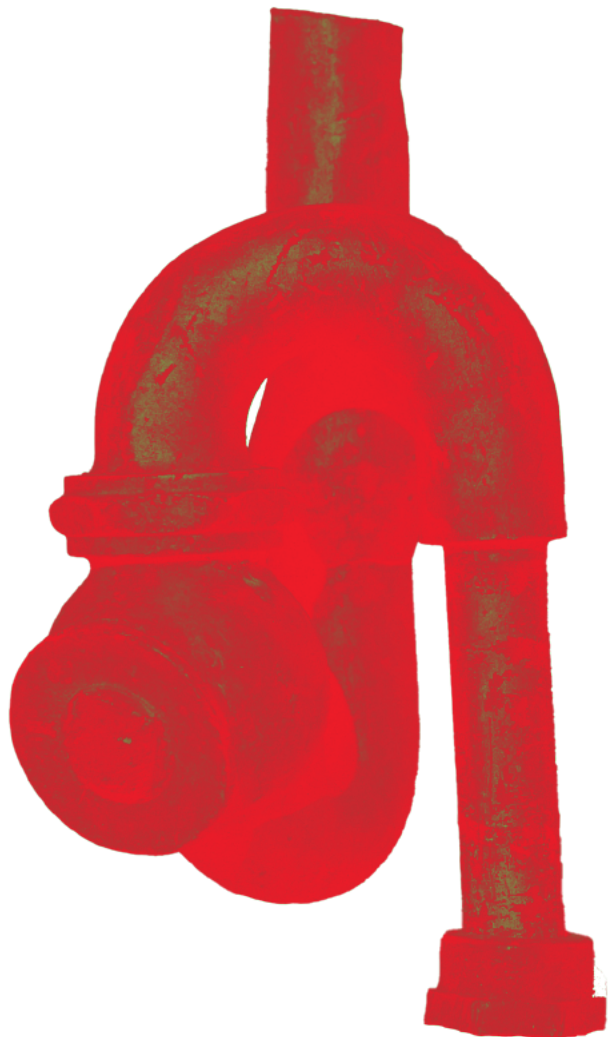


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42 Stephen Calloway, "Edward James' Interiors," in *A Surreal Life: Edward James* (London: The Royal Pavilion, Libraries & Museums, Brighton and Hove, Philip Wilson Publishers, 1998), 94. 43 The exhibition *The Thirties: British Art and Design after the War* ran from October 25, 1979 until January 13, 1980 at the Hayward Gallery on London's Southbank.



In 1932, British artist Paul Nash designed a bathroom for the Austrian dancer and film star Tilly Losch. The bathroom was commissioned by poet and surrealist art collector Edward James for his London home at 35 Wimpole Street, where he lived with the feted Losch during their short and tempestuous marriage. Although made for a private house and unlikely to have been seen or experienced by many, the bathroom captured the public imagination and garnered critical acclaim at the time of completion. Art historian Stephen Calloway, whose essay in a monograph on Edward James is the most extensive account of the surrealist patron's visionary approach to interior design, writes,

"The one truly extraordinary room in the house [35 Wimpole Street], Tilly Losch's glass bathroom, was not one that was generally seen; however, both from a small number of photographs published at the time and perhaps even more by word of mouth, it gained a considerable degree of celebrity and came to be considered as undoubtedly one of the key interiors of the decade." (42)

Tilly Losch's glass bathroom was Nash's only completed work of interior design, and was damaged in London bombing during World War II. Surviving pieces of the interior were removed from Wimpole Street in around 1947 and taken to James' family home in West Dean, Sussex. The excavated parts remained there until the bathroom once again became an object of fascination and exemplar of progressive modern design from the 1930s when it was presented at an exhibition at the Hayward gallery in 1979 on art and design of the period. (43) It entered the V&A collection shortly afterwards.

Nash's original decorative design achieved the integrated harmony of light, space and colour he believed essential for modern habitation. The room—the modern realm of the apartment or bedsit as opposed to the entire house as inhabited by earlier generations—"is of importance and must be considered seriously", he wrote in *Room and Book*, (44) a collection of essays published in 1932, in which Nash set out his view on modern design, architecture, book-making and the challenges of professional practice. In a chapter entitled "The Room Equipped," Nash writes:

"We live in a conscious age... and the dearest wish of most people today is to be aware, first of themselves and then of their surroundings.'... 'So what time there is must be spent in self-expression,' and one means of 'expression' is found in 'creating' what is called 'our own surroundings'". (45)

Nash's bathroom design is of significant interest as an example of his pursuit—through his painting and design work—of structural harmony and variety through surface, pattern and composition to create, "a world to inhabit in which one might enjoy the forgotten luxury of contemplation". (46) Testing his architectural ideas in practice would not have been possible had it not been for Edward James' own voracious commitment to creating such unique surroundings for himself in his inherited properties in London and Sussex and, after the war, at his sprawling ranch in Xilitla, Mexico.

The Nash/Losch bathroom was reconstructed for the Hayward exhibition by the same company that had originally installed the bathroom at Wimpole Street, and entered the V&A collection after it closed in early 1980. The

44 Paul Nash, *Room and Book* (London: Soncino Press, 1932) 45 Paul Nash, "The Room Equipped," in *Room and Book*, 33. 46 Nash, *The Room Equipped*, 54.

acquisition of the Losch bathroom was subject to much internal discussion at the V&A, because the interior consisted of a mixture of original, period, and remade fittings. According to a file note on the object's provenance and acquisition, Roy Strong, director of the V&A at the time, regarded it as "phoney". Nevertheless, the V&A pursued and agreed to the acquisition, and the bathroom has remained in the collection until the present day. It has never been reassembled for display at the V&A, and there are very few photographs of the original and its faithful reproduction. (47) Despite this lack of documentation, I was as captivated by these photographic records as the design interested readership seeing and reading about this stunning modern bathroom and "total" work of art when first published in the 1930s. The invitation to speak at "Intimacy Exposed" coincided with my own research into complete rooms and significant interior and architectural fragments in the V&A collection, which could be returned to public display—or indeed displayed for the first time—at V&A East, a new satellite project due to open in the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in London in 2024. The context of the research for this paper is our attempt to define which of the V&A's many interior architecture treasures can and should be displayed at V&A East. Paul Nash's bathroom for Edward James and Tilly Losch is a significant example of the conceptual unity of art, design, and interior architecture, and a fascinating story of the importance—and drama—of artistic patronage in the early 20th century. That the site of this highpoint of creative expression is the seemingly humble domestic bathroom makes this object even more intriguing.

47 Photographic, press, and curatorial documents are held in object record files at the V&A. A few photographs of the re-made bathroom are available through the RIBA image website (RIBA Pix, <https://www.architecture.com/image-library/>) and images in the Hayward Gallery archives.

48 Peter B. Flint, "Tilly Losch, Exotic Dancer, Is Dead," *New York Times*, December 25, 1975, <https://www.nytimes.com/1975/12/25/archives/tilly-losch-exotic-dancer-is-dead.html>, accessed September 1, 2019.



Ottilie Ethel Leopoldine Herbert, Countess of Carnarvon (1903–1975), known professionally as Tilly Losch, was an Austrian dancer, choreographer, and actress trained in classical ballet and modern dance. She worked across Europe and the USA, performing in both theater and film, and also worked as a choreographer. Losch's *New York Times* obituary recalled the "exotic dancer" acclaimed by critics for her "superb grace," "brilliant technique" and "much personal charm". (48) She was noted for the fluent use of only her hands and arms, which spun a captivating, rhythmic imagery. Edward James (1907–1984) was born to a wealthy industrialist and a socialite. The family had aristocratic connections and his godfather, King Edward VII, was rumored to have been his father. James was an Eton and Oxford-educated poet, art collector, and patron of enormous independent resources who embraced surrealism and amassed one of the world's most significant private collections of surrealist art. He moved in avant-garde literary and artistic circles, and his properties in the south of England and London became the center of his most celebrated collaborations and commissions. James first saw Losch perform in 1928 at her London debut of Noël Coward's musical revue, *This Year of Grace*. James was twenty-one and Losch twenty-five. The young aesthete was instantly entranced and quickly became obsessed with the beguiling dancer. Their relationship was tempestuous and short-lived, causing a scandal when they divorced in 1934 after three years of marriage. James accused the notoriously cruel Losch of having an affair and she counter-sued claiming he was homosexual, although James was in fact bisexual. Losch lost the appeal.

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49 For a detailed overview of the intersection between Nash's works of art and design, see Inge Fraser, "From A Sheet of Paper to the Sky. Pattern in the work of Paul Nash," in *Paul Nash* (London: Tate Publishing, 2016).

Paul Nash (1889–1946) was a British artist most well-known for his surrealist paintings and art produced in the context of the two world wars as an official war artist. He was revered for his multidisciplinary practice, which included book-making, textile and product design, photography, illustration, set and interior design. He embraced an integrated approach to art that ranged from the surreal to the decorative and applied arts. Nash's work painted during and after the Great War were a literal and metaphorical exploration of the devastating physical and psychological effects of war. As his surrealist visual language developed, Nash's work interwove the haunted landscapes of the mind with British coastal scenery where the effects of war scarred the terrain. He employed recurrent illusionistic devices such as the mirror and the frame, which gave his deeply personal landscape subjects a domestic and architectural quality. Like many leading modern artists of his generation, Nash designed posters for corporate clients including London Transport and Shell, and extended his formal language of disrupted perspectival space and surreal, abstracted representation to the world of advertising and communication design. His work with British manufacturers included designs for glassware, textiles, books, and patterned paper. Nash lamented the parochial, sentimental idea of the 'fine arts' and urged that the field of the artist should encompass applied art and that patterns should be considered as important as paintings. (49) His interest in shifting perspective and pattern was used to dazzling effect in his bathroom for 35 Wimpole Street.

Edward James was familiar with Nash and his work, but the only documentation found in the Nash Archive at Tate, which describes their relationship at the time of the bathroom commission, was a note from Nash to his wife stating that, “James has bought *Swan* — bless him”. (50) This pithy insight suggests a friendly personal relationship between artist and patron.

For James, art was life. He expressed his passions and inner world through surreal and extravagant interior design. James’ marriage to Losch inspired an extensive remodeling of 35 Wimpole Street that catalyzed a lifelong commitment to the “realization of fantasies through decoration” (51) in his domestic spheres. Stephen Calloway has compared James’ behavior to that of a bowerbird, known for building and ornamenting its nest with shiny, colorful found objects.

Before exploring the unique collaboration between Nash, James and Losch, it is important to understand the context of James’ artistic vision for his homes. Nash’s ‘Bathroom for a Dancer’ was one of many intriguing interior and architectural projects that enabled James’ surrealist interests to flourish in built form. James made minor renovations to his inherited family estate at West Dean, which included the smaller Monkton House designed by Edwin Lutyens in 1902. By 1935 Monkton had become James’ passion project for a total surrealist artwork. Architects Christopher Nicholson and Hugh Casson, through consultation with Lutyens’ son Robert, carried out significant renovations to the exterior as well as modernization of the interior. Bamboo drainpipes, palm-tree columns, illusionistic decorative plaster *trompe l’oeil* swags around the

50 Paul Nash to Margaret Nash, *Postcard*, May 20, 1932, TGA 8313/1/1/223, Paul Nash Archive, Tate Britain. 51 Calloway, “Edward James’ Interiors”, 98.

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windows, a lilac exterior render and a roof clock showing the days of the week were playfully surreal interventions that made Lutyens’ original design almost unrecognizable. James’ close and creatively productive relationship with Salvador Dali came to the fore inside the house. In the 1930s, James was Dali’s most important patron and they collaborated on a number of surreal objects such as the *Lobster Telephone* (1936) and the now iconic *Mae West Lips Sofa* (1937/38). Two of the sofas furnished Monkton House and the V&A recently acquired one example for its collection. When showing signs of wear and tear, Dali and James decided that repairs to the worn fabric were to be made into a decorative feature: appliquéd caterpillars crawl along the upper lip, adding a surreal, uncanny quality to the oversized lips. Richly patterned wall coverings and sumptuous furnishings completed the whimsical and fantastical experience at Monkton.

Throughout the 1930s, James commissioned a series of interventions and alterations at 35 Wimpole Street. The first significant alterations were bathrooms for himself and Losch. Geoffrey Houghton-Brown, a notable young painter known for his painted interiors and murals in a jazz-modern style, designed the new bathroom. The study for the modernistic ‘Pompeian’ mural in James’ bathroom, now in the V&A collection, shows a washed decorative scheme depicting mythological scenes and illusionistic architectural forms. Nash’s design is, by contrast, a triumph of modern materials and abstract composition. A committed Modernist, his use of industrial materials and glass “offered the most extensive realm of possibilities in modern architecture”. (52) Again, in *Room and Book*, he

52 Nash, *The Room Equipped*, 51.





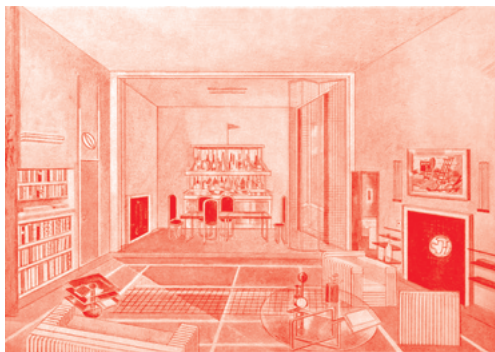
noted that, “its influence begins to change the character of interior structure and decoration. No other material contains so many elements of magic.” He went on, “[...] a careful study of its application must stimulate the least imaginative mind and excite it to adventure”. (53)

The Nash/Losch bathroom is made up of panes of colored and mirrored glass. Some were plain and others patterned with a mottled and dimpled surface texture, a feature designed so that the effect of steam and condensation on the glass did not destroy the overall interior effect. The glass panels were in shades of black, purple, and pink, which created a luxurious setting that was also dynamic, emphasizing Nash’s bespoke concept for his dancer client. The irregular arrangement of the glass panels creates fractured reflections and a broken decorative rhythm to produce an ever-changing balletic mural enhanced by the room’s lush and shifting color palette. “We are no longer interested in renovations. We are beginning to work in terms of architectural relations [...] we are studying surface and grain, texture and vibration,” (54) writes Nash.

Spatial and design elements such as the arabesque curves of the lighting fixtures, angled mirrored panels, and the bathroom’s unique practice ladder underline Nash’s choreography of the space and the disorientating sense of movement in his design. Photographers Dell and Wainwright adopted a New Objectivity approach to composition in their images for a period publication, capturing the dizzying sensation of experiencing the space through angled reflections. Imagining the body viewed in this space, Nash’s use of mirror panels suggests a surrealist

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55 Calloway, “Edward James’ Interiors”, 94.



preoccupation with the body as explored in photography, particularly the intensely scrutinized female form and its often distorted, dismembered, and fragmented representation. There are no photographs of the bathroom in use, and indeed it is not clear if the practice ladder was ever used by Losch. The object is an appropriate playful motif in the overall scheme, and signals Nash’s recurrent exploration of movement and three-dimensional pictorial space, in his paintings and illustrations from that time, using ladders and open-frame architectural structures. While little is known about Losch’s involvement in the commission, Nash’s environment is undeniably a performative space, a total artwork conceived for a dancer and choreographer. According to influential *Vogue* journalist Madge Garland, writing at the time, it was the *ne plus ultra* in bathrooms. (55)

In 1930, Nash submitted a design for an apartment interior to a competition run by the *Architectural Review* magazine. The fictitious client was “Lord Benbow”, a Clydesdale shipbuilder, who was characterized as a traditionalist with an interest in sport. Nash’s design for a “sporty” apartment is an exuberant, tongue-in-cheek rendering of the furniture of sporting activity—from football nets and rugby goalposts to tennis court markings and a bowling-alley like bar—transposed to the modern interior. The palette of materials prefigures the Losch bathroom. Here we see black and transparent glass, chromed metal, and the recurring structural forms and lattice patterns, which appear in his paintings, illustrations and textile designs.

Lord Benbow’s apartment is a theater of fantasy and the Losch bathroom design is likewise a stage set, albeit

one in which the intimate toilette ritual is performed alone or at most—we imagine—to an audience of one. The splendor and sensuousness of the interior suggests that other performances await, and Nash's design achieves the quality of an installation: a stage set with support structures and props for the protagonists of 35 Wimpole Street. The overlap of life and art was taken to further extremes when James commissioned Green and Abbot to produce a carpet leading to the bathroom bearing a repeat pattern of Losch's wet footprint. The carpet was redesigned for West Dean but, following their divorce, Losch's footprint was replaced with the paw-print of James' pet dog.

In 1933, in desperation to save his ailing marriage, James financed Les Ballets, a newly formed dance company enabling productions starring Losch to be staged in Paris and London. Sets for productions such as the ballet *L'Errante*, choreographed by George Balanchine with set designs by Pavel Tchelitchew, are reminiscent of the extravagant drapery of James' study at Wimpole Street. The surreal splendor of the interiors and decorative set-pieces such as the study and bathrooms, intensify the stage set quality of the house. The bathroom is both the site of an intimate, ritual performance and the backdrop to a performed life. The interiors and James' collection of props from original artworks to decorative and architectural objects take on the quality of a carefully staged installation: a 'total' architecture for an art-directed life.

The photo documentation of the re-staged bathroom at the Hayward Gallery exhibition in 1979 reveals the performative and glamorous nightclub-like quality of the space through Nash's use of architectural glass, lighting

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and chromed fittings. The bathroom transforms from private to public space, awaiting activation by a cast of unknown but imaginable actors. For a major Paul Nash retrospective at Tate Britain in 2016, the cultural historian Michael Bracewell discussed Nash's work with exhibition curator Inga Fraser and artist Marc Camille Chaimowicz for *Tate, Etc.* magazine. Exploring the lineage of 20th century artistic practice and the blurring of boundaries between creative disciplines, Bracewell posits that it takes little for the viewer to "shift perspective and intention to view an interior like that as an installation." (56) He goes on:

"The uptake of ideas from the Modern Movement, Art Deco and the early 1970s by pop stylists was this notion that you took something from the world of fine art and you put it on the front line of mainstream pop culture, and you lived it [...] But it is also on the aesthetic frequency of being in a very cool room, or a set for people in which to act something out. What interests me is the blurring between something that has been designed as part of the service industry and something which is being used as almost a prop."

Edward James' approach to interiors is perhaps the ultimate idea of an art-directed lifestyle. The uninhabited Nash/Losch bathroom awaits live theatrical or cinematic direction and speaks of a film-set as much as a stage or nightclub set. Promotional photography of the bathroom recalls a suite of photographs in the V&A collection by British photographer Bridget Smith. Taken in 1999, *Glamour Studio* documents the empty sets constructed for glamour photography in the pornographic industry. Smith writes, "I have chosen to photograph sets from the world of glamour

56 Michael Bracewell et al., "From the Surreal to the Decorative," Tate Britain, <https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-38-autumn-2016/surreal-decorative>, accessed February 4, 2021.

photography, as play-acting seems such an integral part of dreaming. Each set offers the potential of the viewer to enter a new role and act out their own fantasies". (57) Here we see the collapse of private and public fantasy, the domestic and cinematic. Both bathrooms are poised, awaiting activity and human interaction to enable us to make sense of them. The mundane bathroom becomes a loaded space, inviting performance and transgression.

Paul Nash's bathroom for Tilly Losch is a rich and complex object. It exemplifies the pursuit of the total environment, a progressive expression of modern architectural and interior design ideas at play in the 1930s. It represents the exchange between art and design practice at the height of the surreal movement. Surviving photographic documents attest to the inventive dynamism and playfulness of this unique environment. It is a stage set waiting for the body in space to describe and bring to life its essential surrealist character. As with all 'restaged' interiors exhumed from their original context, what becomes essential is not just an engagement with the historical importance of the design of this object from behind the 'fourth wall,' but an encounter with its immersive spatial and physical experience. One must inhabit the room to truly understand its significance and design value.