

Editor's Note

It's not an easy task—profiling a space. A major difficulty is how to describe and make an argument about a space *at the same time*. In each paragraph, Emilie Schneider tells us, not just what she sees, but also what the detail means and why it matters.

Schneider also pays special attention to how she organizes her thoughts. How does the isolation of quotations affect the use of evidence? Does it enhance coherence or unity? Indeed, without careful attention to structure, her essay might be as messy as the house she describes. Are there other ways that the style mimics the content? Can you find places where the text is descriptively “cluttered” like the house it depicts?

Some profiles of spaces end up talking about the space's effect on people—and vice versa: How people move through that space, how that space makes them feel, how they shape it, and how that space shapes their lives. What do we learn about the family through the space? How would such a house make readers feel?

How might a mess be beautiful?

In the Mess of Things

Emilie Schneider

Every grain of sand is a piece to the ocean floor just as every object contributes to a collection – shells, fishing lures, nets, rope, antique buoys, model boats, bells, propellers, lighthouses, ship wheels. However nautical and thrifty, this is no maritime museum, but my grandparents' Crescent City residence – their coastal delight. In a mess of things, the details can go unnoticed; objects blend together as one collection. It is difficult to stand out when crowded and surrounded by another item just as interesting as the next. Yet, these details define my grandparents' house. Its personality has been shaped and characterized by every unique square foot and every piece of anything that dwells within it. Although it seems impossible to reach an exact count of objects, every single one is there for a reason, one that is determined by the personalities that sculpted this distinct home. Grandpa claims, “It's nothing special.” I beg to differ.

Background:

“They sure love their freedom from the big city.” – Auntie Karin

Multiple times throughout the year, my grandparents will escape from their home in the busy city life of Sacramento, California, to “the city where the redwoods meet the sea,” Crescent City, California. An average driving time of eight hours up the coast brings them to the other place they call home, a place that could only be a

product of their personalities. Twenty-five years ago on a plot of land with a small preexisting unit, Grandpa worked around the city code, to build this large structure he called an *add-on* (it is not connected to the first house). About 150 yards from the sandy shoreline sits the rocky yard and driveway, the welcome mat to this unusual dwelling. Upon approaching the outside, one is overwhelmed with anatomical parts of a ship; nasturtium flower beds lined with rail-road ties; ropes, shells, and rocks – all garnishing a blue-gray house with an... *interesting* architectural design.

From the outside, the geometry appears fairly simple: a large 2-story rectangle with a right triangle resting on top. This triangle is the location of the bedrooms, whose sloped ceilings have accounted for many cases of heads hitting the wood-paneled ceiling when someone first sits up after a night of slumber. Grandpa, friends, and builders put in a great deal of labor to build this house. Some worked in exchange for fresh-caught fish. Grandpa recalled a time he was working on the roof, looked out to the ocean and spotted fisherman catching salmon close to shore. He set down his tools, joined the fisherman in his own boat, and returned to work once he caught his limit.

“It was plain when I first saw it.” –Dad

It is nearly impossible to imagine my grandparents’ house as once being empty. They have a deep love for the ocean and throughout the 25 years of the home’s existence, they have collected and displayed any object that reflects this affection – *any object*. A heavy-duty rope outlines a majority of the house’s interior. This rope, a favorite decorative feature of my older sister, Jessica, borders the seams where walls meet, encircles portholes windows and picture frames, follows stair cases, and wraps support beams. Many shelves exist in the house in corners, parallel to the walls, or above countertops, displaying pieces of Grandma and Grandpa’s nautical collection. Shells are found in almost every square foot, varying between abalone, clam, mussel, common tide pool pieces, and rare souvenirs brought back from cruises. Starfish, rocks, wooden figures of seabirds and fish, mini lighthouses, and model boats also litter the many shelves and windowsills. In Dad’s opinion, “the amount of knickknacks is over the top.” However, Grandma loves to display what she likes and justifies its abundance saying, “If something breaks, it doesn’t matter.” The extensive wall space is also put to use. Rare is a vertical section that is not accented with an oceanic painting, fishing net, ship steering wheels, Grandpa’s handcrafted wooden fish cutouts, antique ship clocks and navigation items, and millions of pictures. Enhancing the multiple levels of ceiling, are items far from typical overhead décor. Strands of old wooden fishing lures, huge antique glass floats, plastic orange buoys Grandpa morphed into lights, and heavy metal chandeliers, all hang at the will of gravity. As the son-in-law, my Dad has observed this house with a keen and skeptical eye. He says, “The house became more... dangerous in an effort to display new additions.” He

recalls once having to take it upon himself to warn Grandpa of the safety hazard of the brass propeller he once had suspended over the stairwell with fishing line.

“The house is less important than the people.” –Grandma

My grandparents' house stores not only items, but countless memories as well. From infancy, my sisters and I have visited often. From the time it was built, my mom and dad, mom's sisters, and my cousins have made frequent visits as well. Every family member has stories to tell about this house, senses and emotions they associate with it, and a connection to it that Grandma and Grandpa have helped construct. Photographs are displayed that have captured the pride and exhaustion after long fishing trips, excitement of birthdays and trips to the beach, wonder of Sacramento Zoo visits, and the happiness of family milestones. Amongst the knick-knacks, accidents are bound to happen. My forehead bears the scar from a time my best friend Marisa accidentally knocked the metal lid to a Chinese pagoda-shaped dish off the counter toward where I sat below it. Aunt Karin is constantly worried that her five and seven year-olds will break something, get into Grandpa's open tackle box, or into his candy dish full of all his prescription drugs. We associate certain scents with this house as well. Everyone has inhaled their share of fumes from Grandpa's burn barrels or woodstove that incinerate anything flammable (always environmentally safe, of course), lead smelting on a camp stove, and of course *the smell* of the house. My younger sister, Sara, describes this attribute as the smell of “paint-thinner, salt, and fish.” Jessica thinks it “smells of antiques, driftwood, and ocean-life” that all meld into an unforgettable nasal experience. Descriptions of the house may vary from one person to the next, but all share its importance and relevance in their life's experiences.

“Why trash it when I can save it?” – Grandpa

My grandparents have a strong disliking for wastefulness and reflect this feeling throughout the house. The collection of nautical paraphernalia seems to grow exponentially because nothing is ever let go to accommodate for new additions. However, this trait has nutritional significance as well, as the kitchen displays. The pantry, refrigerator, and freezer are always stocked with canned foods, snack foods, cooking and baking items, as well as an unwritten rule: *always check expiration date before consuming*. Items have a long and fruitful life before deemed as garbage. My dad, the son-in-law, has a personality that clashes with this idea. In my own house, unnecessary clutter or things with no use go “missing” (in the trash) as a result of his need for order and purpose. Often Dad looks around this house with a critical eye. “They are collectors and even save enough to the point of hoarding,” he jokes, partially serious. An item is never discarded just because it has been around awhile, only shoved to the back of the shelf to make more room. I have come across many familiar brand-

name foods with unfamiliar package designs and have learned to read and sniff before eating. It is no surprise to find the same bag of expired candy in the same spot on the center island the following summer when we return. Grandpa often leaves a pan of “re-usable” peanut oil on the stove, ready for the next fish fry. The total number of refrigerators in the house equals about 8, plus an additional freezer or two. This number seems bogus, but they are all put to use, most of them completely stocked with catches from previous fishing and crabbing seasons. When on the mission in search of a particular food item that could be in eight different places, the individual is greeted with a strong blow to the nostrils every time a fridge door is opened. My father remarks that the “strength of the smell is so strong, [one would] swear that what is being eaten also tastes of fish.” While enjoying her dessert, Sara often finds herself thinking, *This ice cream tastes fishy...*

“Grandpa always has to do something his way.” – Mom

Grandpa is a do-it-yourself kind of guy. Stored away in the garage are extra material and supplies of about every type that have accumulated according to great deals he encounters. With a potential use in mind, Grandpa collects various items. If something needs repair, or he is in the mood for modifying a component of the house, the lucky material is dug out of the dark and dusty garage and meets its fate. My grandpa has been smart with his money since his first job and only in the worst-case scenario will he pay someone to do work for him. “If I do it, I know it’ll be done right,” Grandpa boasts. However, he has developed a quite a notorious reputation within the family for his untraditional handyman work. Copious examples of this are displayed throughout the entire house, inside and out. Dad pokes fun at Grandpa’s self-done plumbing and says, “When you flush the toilet, you take your chances.” The faucets seem to be part of a prank that Grandpa is playing on new guests; the *hot* and *cold* nozzles are reversed in the shower and the sink of the deck bathroom only dispenses ice cold water, though it has both nozzles.

The deck is perhaps the most concentrated display of Grandpa’s *creativity*. Covering the wooden deck is Astroturf the age of the house and Auntie Karin jokes, “Who wouldn’t want a deck you could vacuum?” The entire deck wraps around to the west and south-facing sides of the house and used to be entirely open to the fresh, chilly ocean breeze, and a beautiful view. Grandpa loves to nap on the deck has gradually enclosed the deck with pieces of glass and plastic to create a greenhouse type of warmth and trapping the smell of the outside décor. This has created a great environment for Grandma’s “ten-thousand tomato plants (Mom)” and the lesser need for a sweat-shirt, but family members feel it has defeated the purpose of having the deck. The last time Auntie Karin and her family visited, to her dismay, Grandpa had enclosed the entire deck, so she took the liberty to get rid of the “claustrophobic feel and

returned the deck to a more natural state.” He reluctantly accepted the improvement. The south side of the deck also contains a room fashioned out of pleated plastic siding that contains a table and chairs and neighbors Grandpa’s petroleum drum barbecue station. Grandpa’s creativity is unparalleled.

“There’s always room for one more.” – Grandma

My grandparents have love their Crescent City home and they express this in many ways, even to the point where they will “tell strangers they have a house in Crescent City” (Auntie Karin). However, this house isn’t important to them simply because they fill it to the brim with objects that reflect their personalities and interests, it has a greater significance. Their love for this house comes from sharing it with loved ones and thriving off their enjoyment and happiness as well. Grandma speaks the truth: there really is always room for one more in this house. With 8.5 beds, couch, and floor space the house can accommodate many. On account of adventures, experiences, enjoyment, and happiness, there is no limit. This house has a place in my heart and others’ and will continue to provide an unequalled and quirky welcome to many more.

Emilie Schneider is a soil science major.

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