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Weekend Arts II

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FRED R. COBRAU/THE NEW YORK TIMES

On Friday, Dec. 12, 1902, Andrew Carnegie moved into his just-finished home at 91st Street and Fifth Avenue, with his wife, Louise, and his 5-year-old daughter, Margaret, to whom he handed the key. By the lights of Manhattan society, the house was in nowhere-ville, near a former shantytown with only a lemonade stand by way of local shopping. No problem. Wherever Carnegie, a 5-foot-2 master of the universe type, decided to settle became a someplace soon.

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From Day 1, the mansion was a must-see. This wasn't because it was beautiful — it's like a bank vault, chunky and dark — but because it was technologically advanced, with full electricity and climate control, and because cer-

Newly Playful, By Design

Damián Ortega's "Controller of the Universe," part of the redesigned Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, which reopens Friday. William Grimes tries out the interactive exhibitions, Page 33.

tain details — its elevator, its pipe organ, its exotic wood carving — set a standard in domestic luxe. Carnegie lived there until his death in 1919; Louise until hers in 1946. Margaret was married there but moved next door. When she died in 1990, her childhood home had long since become headquarters for the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum. House and museum have always made an awkward fit, a standoff between preservation and innovation. Because the mansion is an artifact, it has been altered only within limits. Exhibition space has stayed tight. A lot of contemporary work looks lost against Gilded Age oak. In 2011, the museum closed for a rethink. It's now reopened

Continued on Page 32

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Newly Playful, by Design



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GLADSTONE GALLERY

From Weekend Page 27

with some problems intact, but the respectful renovation by Gluckman Mayner Architects has a new, wide-open gallery space, a cafe and a raft of be-your-own-designer digital enhancements.

Digital enchantment is more the way the museum is pitching these interactive components, putting a big emphasis on audience involvement and play. The hardheaded old Carnegie might well have dismissed such feel-goodness, but he's not the target audience now. His young daughter, Margaret, would be closer to the desired demographic, and it's fun to imagine her revisiting her now-plugged-in childhood haunts.

She would certainly have some surprises. If she came in by the original 91st Street entrance — there's now an alternate route through the 90th Street garden, cafe and gift shop — the first thing she'd see is a big, white, low Nike-like zip where the organ used to be. This



Above, a glove that was designed for space but never used there; below right, an Eskimo parka made of whale gut and a high-performance wheelchair that's handy when ramps aren't available.

is the new ticket desk. Does it clash with its baronial surroundings? Sure. But if you're looking for visual consistency, you're in the wrong place. This institution, like design itself, is built on tumult and friction. A time-traveling Margaret would feel good about baronial, but also get the point of the zip.

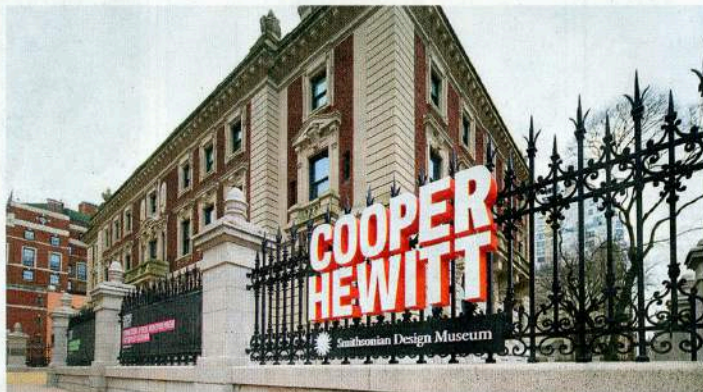
That's the kind of double consciousness the museum seems to be after. And it's the dynamic behind the new Process Lab, designed by Local Projects. You're encouraged to go there first and try designing yourself, to get a feel for the thinking involved. Some hardware — table-size touch screens you can draw on — is of the moment, but the tasks proposed (redesign what's in your pocket, customize a pup tent, invent a lampshade) are everyday. The message: With a little effort, anything can be personalized, and probably improved.

Improvement is the theme of "Beautiful Users," an exhibition organized by Ellen Lupton, which proposes that the principle of ergonomics — user friendliness — has increasingly dictated the direction of design. A telephone created in the 1930s by Henry Dreyfuss (1904-72) is a handsome but unwieldy black sculpture; by the 1950s, he had come up with Princess phone, a bit squat but portable and sometimes pink. And so the way forward has gone, and goes.

The tension between function and aesthetics also runs through the large, smart "Tools: Extending Our Reach,"



Top, a Campana brothers Vermelha chair, made with rope, and display cases at Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, which reopens on Friday. Above, structurally correct scale models; left, the museum exterior.



The show's largest piece, a sculptural environment by the contemporary Mexican artist *Damián Ortega*, is more poetic than practical. Titled "Controller of the Universe," its filament-suspended saws, drills and hammer suggest toolshed explosion. And right behind it you see even more violent eruptions in vivid images of the sun streamed live from NASA's Solar Dynamics Observatory.

Together, they're the museum's single most spectacular sight, though smaller, subtler dramatic moments are on the second floor, which is given over entirely to the permanent collection; the museum has never had room to show it in such quantity before. Display cases running down the center of one long gallery form a double-sided enfilade of items grouped by texture, pattern and color.

In this case, the color is red, and work from the 1960s, when design was totally popping, dominates: in Op Art carpets, Josef Albers prints, rock posters, an Etore Sottsass Valentine typewriter and a swatch of 1967 Razzmatazz wallpaper by William Ustema.

The installation is punctuated by more wallpaper, potentially endless amounts, accessible through an immersive digital display that lets you pick a pattern you fancy from the archives and, through projection, cover the gallery walls with it. You can imagine Margaret Carnegie being particularly enthralled with this piece of imaging magic: The gallery was once her nursery.

The history of the house as a lived environment is directly acknowledged elsewhere. The family library, called the Teak Room for its intact ornamental

Continued on Following Page



installed by Cara McCarty and Matilda McQuaid in the new, white-box Barbara and Morton Mandel Design Gallery on the mansion's third floor. Here, in an array of instrumental objects borrowed from other Smithsonian museums, domestic meets cosmic, protective meets lethal, and past meets present.

For example, an Old Stone Age chopper made 1.85 million years ago in Tanzania gets a 2011 update in a hand ax, with a rubber grip produced by two Israeli designers, Dov Ganchrow and Ami Drach. There's plenty of evidence that people are into killing: fish hooks, bird darts, weapons for war. But they're also

good at taking care of themselves. Encased in a bubbly whale-gut Eskimo parka, you could survive an Arctic winter. Equipped with the elegant 19th-century medical instruments made by Joseph-Frédéric-Benoît Charrière, in France, you could perform any sort of surgery, or at least look classy trying.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

From Preceding Page

North Indian-style carving, has a small modest tribute to its American designer, Lockwood de Forest. And galleries that were originally Louise and Andrew Carnegie's bedrooms hold material from the museum's founding collection, assembled by a pair of enterprising sisters, Eleanor and Sara Hewitt. Beginning in the 19th century, they created a design museum for the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, founded by their grandfather.

The sisters were genteel pack rats and knew lots of well-placed others of their kind (J. P. Morgan) from whom they solicited, and received, generous donations. The tiniest tip of their collection, which came to the Smithsonian in the 1960s, is visible here in an assortment of 16th-century textiles, Winslow Homer sketches, porcelain snuceboats, brooches, buttons, locks, ancient Greek

The Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum reopens Friday at 2 East 91st Street, at Fifth Avenue, Manhattan; 212-849-8400, cooperhewitt.org. The cafe opens at 7:30 a.m. daily and is accessible without an admission ticket.

pots and perhaps their most purely delightful acquisitions — you'll love them for this — luxury bird cages. One is in the shape of a New York church. Another a Delft-tiled Dutch cottage. A third is the Rialto Bridge in Venice.

These are basically the equivalent of toys for grown-ups, avian dollhouses. I don't know what the infant Margaret, an only child, had at home to amuse herself, but these days, her house is full of such fantasy-inducing things. A small second-floor gallery overlooking the grand staircase has a display of extraordinary, masterpiece-quality, structurally correct architectural models — miniature basilicas, foot-high Brancusi-like staircases to nowhere, to heaven — donated to the museum in 2007 by Clare and Eugene Thaw.

Back on the first floor, a personal-choice exhibition organized by the illustrator Maira Kalman filters childhood through adult knowledge, with some kooky little chairs, a vintage edition of "Winnie-the-Pooh" and a pretty glass bonbon bowl joined by Abraham Lincoln's gold pocket watch and the violet pall that covered his coffin.

Ms. Kalman's show, at least partly, is about how objects from childhood create and store memories, and how those



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memories — and objects — can become more vivid and precious over time as other, darker memories and experiences accrue. I appreciate the Cooper Hewitt's emphasis on creative, or at the very least, participatory, technology. Maybe a new generation of visitors is

primed to approach design as a fast-paced, fast-processed game of movement and change, improvement through tweaking.

But I kept coming back to the building that all this was happening in, a house that has altered its function and,

The new gift shop at Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, in a building that began life as a home for Andrew Carnegie.

now more than ever with the renovation, altered its design, but can't help but retain memories. (Heather Ewing has produced a fine book for the occasion; "Life of a Mansion: The Story of Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum.") When Margaret Carnegie married in 1910, she had her wedding at home. She chose to have the ceremony not in the mansion's formal reception room or dining room, but in the breakfast room. (Part of "Beautiful Users" is in the space now.) Why?

Maybe because the room had nice light from the adjoining conservatory. Or maybe because it was the room designed for informality, where a child could relax, unplug, be near adults but not with them as the day went on, a good place to dream in a time when you could still imagine creating the world you want, and being at home in it — which is really design's promise still.