
GILE
NDLE WITH CARE
WITH CAR

Norman Potter (1923–1995) was an English designer, writer, and educator. In 1964, he "set about re-examining certain assumptions or postulates of the modern movement in design," founding a new "Construction School" at the West of England College of Art in Bristol.

James Langdon is preparing a biography of Potter as an educator, told through what remains of his work, and according to his commandment to speak of objects only in their presence. The first chapter of this project was published in *A Circular*, no. 3 (2015).

All materials reproduced courtesy Sally Potter and Charlotte Potter for the Norman Potter Archive.

Thanks to Robin Kinross for help in preparing this text.

Cover image and other photographs in Hastings by Stuart Whipps.

1.

The 1969 first edition of Norman Potter's *What is a designer* is the only title in the Studio Vista series not to include any images. Nor does it include any color printing, or a portrait of the author on its back cover, also typical of the 40-book series whose abundantly visual contents span art, film, architecture, and urbanism. Potter's introduction gets straight to the point:

There are many well-illustrated books on design artefacts and this is not one of them.

Perhaps not wanting to seem too aesthetically austere, he does allow:

If students want to, I hope they will scribble diagrams all over the argument (and there are a few blank pages), which might be a designer's way of at once possessing an argument and departing from it.

This argument — the implicit response to the question of why the book has no images — is Potter's assertion of the procedural and relational aspects of design as meaningful in themselves, and his attending to these over the coveting of artifacts. In *What is a designer*, consideration of artifacts is strictly primary, never mediated by an image:

Before deciding that Corbusier or Frank Lloyd-Wright are thankfully the last of the monumental masons, hitch across Europe or America and see for yourself.

A typed script for a lecture, undated, found among Potter's papers offers an even more definitive explanation of his skepticism toward images of design:

There is also, I believe, a commandment — if I may put it so strongly — to speak of artefacts only in their presence. (…) Persuasive images are two-a-penny but as such, they have very little meaning.

BoTSL#11 2016 JUL 19 9:52 AM

2.

Models & Constructs, the monograph published by Hyphen Press in 1990, is probably as complete a visual representation of Potter's design work as is possible given the sentiments expressed above, and the consequent lack of documentation from the workshop that he ran during the 1950s at Corsham in Wiltshire. The book includes drawings, plans and some photographs, all reproduced in black ink on white paper. And this sentence: "Nobody ponces about in a dusty workshop with a camera."

Of the photographs that do appear, many were made by Potter's wife Caroline. These images are unpretentious, immediately more concerned with recording the existence of the work, and the effort, than aspiring to any particular stylistic genre of design photography. "A small bookshop" is shown as a model, and in a couple of unsatisfactory views through an outside window. Inside, a single blurred image from an awkward angle. "A bedroom" appears in a dark and cramped view, not affording much technical insight.

One work stands out for the quality of its representation. "A kitchen in London" is shown in a convincing series of photographs. These were made professionally for an article published in *The Observer* newspaper in April 1961. Noticeably higher fidelity than anything else in the book, they show the grain of the wood, the structural fixtures, and convey something of the nature of the design: a raised platform with cupboards and open shelving units suspended by vertical supports running floor to ceiling. They are printed in relatively high contrast in *Models & Constructs*, giving an impression of dynamism and depth, of angular planes poised in space.

The kitchen was commissioned by architect Richard Penton for his Victorian house in Islington, north London. It was installed as a room-within-a-room, imposing its modernism in the midst of decorative cornicing and a Georgian-style fireplace complete with fluting, Ionic capitals and a frieze. The *Observer* article describes it as "a new kind of kitchen landscape."

BoTSL#11 2016 JUL 19 9:52 AM



THE OBSERVER, SUNDAY, APRIL 9, 1961

NEW DIMENSIONS IN LIVING

THE SPACE-MAKERS

One of the most original contributions to domestic space-making is Norman Potter's platform kitchen designed and made by him in a ground floor conversion in Canonbury. He is tutor in interior design at the Royal College of Art. This construction is in effect a room within a room, a new complex within an existing dining-living area created out of two lofty Victorian rooms, with party wall removed.

What emerges is a new kind of kitchen landscape. Some of the parts were prefabricated in Corsham Workshop. We have accepted since the war the "proscenium arch" type of kitchen. We have just been prepared to glimpse the kitchen from the dining area through some kind of dividing unit, with some kind of curtain device to drop down at the debris stage.

Here at last is the kitchen "in the round," no concealment, something to be used, grasped and appreciated in an entirely three-dimensional way, a concatenation of appliances suspended in an open framework which works at operation level and at the same time offers fascinating perspectives of interpenetrating lines and surfaces from every angle.

This is the kind of revolutionary thinking which has repercussions only in decades to come, but it is also something to brood on now while we are emptying the attic, clogging up the garage.

MICHAEL WICKHAM

Norman Potter's platform kitchen in Canonbury—"a new kind of kitchen landscape."

3.

I first met Potter's younger daughter Charlotte in London in 2011, when she invited me to look at his archive, at that time kept at Sally's studio in Bethnal Green. As we opened boxes and discussed their contents, Charlotte mentioned that the disassembled Penton kitchen was in storage at her home in Hastings. Since then we have occasionally discussed the possibility of me taking on the task of documenting this work and attempting to find it a long-term home, perhaps in a museum.

BoTSL#11 2016 JUL 19 9:52 AM

In March 2016, artist Stuart Whipps and I are driving from Birmingham to Hastings in a rental van to collect the kitchen. Stuart is helping me to photograph the remains of Potter's work, a project that has already taken us to Edinburgh, Bristol, and southern France. A copy of *Models & Constructs* is on the dashboard and we are considering one of its defining propositions. Describing the kitchen, Potter wrote:

As far as possible the kitchen was considered in the round, i.e. as seen and used in movement: there are no "backs" in the accepted sense, except where a (required) partial screen faces the related south end of the room.

The implications of this idea, "no backs," seem to me best expressed in an anecdote told by the graphic designer Richard Hollis, a teaching colleague of Potter at The West of England College of Art in Bristol. Hollis remembers Potter directing the installation of a college exhibition from the top of a ladder. One tutor, Ken Campbell, pointed out: "Nobody's going to see this exhibition from up there." Potter shouted down: "God will."

This explains Potter's "commandment," and his distrust of the "persuasive image" as matters of faith. The fixed perspective of the camera solicits a kind of concealment. In a photograph of a designed space, an object incidentally placed on a surface becomes deliberate. And every plane, every angle, locates itself in relation to the edges of the frame, seeking graphic alignment. The professional production of such images for publication is motivated by the need for appealing content and this permits flattery: awkward and unresolved aspects can subtly be made to disappear into the "back."

Talking to Charlotte we get a feeling of what it means for her to part with the kitchen. She has obviously enjoyed caring for it, but her instinct is that sentimentality isn't a possibility in handling her father's legacy. Having the kitchen conserved and made public does seem the right thing to do, despite the admittedly uncomfortable prospect of inserting it into an institutional context. (Potter: "Artists (including writers) should only occasionally be buttered; play it how you will, institutional contact is a

BoTSL#11 2016 JUL 19 9:52 AM



BoTSL#11 2016 JUL 19 9:52 AM

buttering.") We have talked about approaching the Victoria & Albert Museum in London. There it would likely become part of a general narrative of fashions in domestic space. The question of whether that is fitting goes unspoken, but our presence suggests that for the Potter family what is important is that his work be kept active.

With a sense of this responsibility, we begin to bring the parts down several flights of stairs and out to the van. Most of the kitchen is in a small room at the top of the house. The large platform and the screen are behind the piano in the back sitting room. In fact, Potter's belongings are throughout the house. Also in the back sitting room are two portable Olivetti 22 typewriters in immaculate condition. On the landing a thoroughly patinated Aalto chair. In the front room the bicycle Potter was riding when he suffered a fatal heart attack in Falmouth in 1995. Charlotte still occasionally rides it.

Charlotte had previously sent photographs of a number of sorry-looking parts of the kitchen, I think to temper expectations of its condition. But as we find it now it seems solid and complete. There is more than I was prepared for: cupboards, refrigerator, sink unit, shelves (some with display glass), and a whole network of supporting joinery. The large platform is complex. Typically for Potter it has precisely rehearsed ergonomics with predetermined channels for cables and fittings. Some decay is apparent: the cylindrical water heater, white enameled with blue trim, has yellowed. The sink unit, also discolored, has a number of fine splits. Overall the condition is as good as could be expected in the absence of professional storage and restoration.

Then a confounding moment. Having moved the bulky sink unit and some of the long vertical supports from the tight space, we reveal cupboards and compartments stacked behind. As I tilt a large unit to lift it, the wrapping at its top edge opens to expose the corner of a surface colored pure primary blue. My preconception of the kitchen is instantly undermined. Despite years of anticipation, I have arrived in the presence of this artifact without appreciating an elementary reality of it. The Penton kitchen is *highly colored.*

BoTSL#11 2016 JUL 19 9:52 AM









4.

The following day, unpacking the kitchen back at the studio, more colored discoveries. The wood itself is various. The dominant material is not the presumptive blond ply but a rich mahogany. This makes the volumes visually heavier than the photographs suggest. There are small panels color-coding various electrical switches with yellow and black formica. And the blue. Several large cupboards and one smaller are faced in the primary blue formica, still clean and bright. Looking for explanation, I see the resemblance to the blue trim of the water heater. They are closely matched, but it hardly seems significant. Maybe Potter

BoTSL#11 2016 JUL 19 9:52 AM

arrived at the blue in relation to some aspect of the interior in Islington. Or it might have been chosen for purely metaphysical reasons. It is probably unknowable now. Richard Penton died in 2000, and when Sally Potter disassembled the kitchen it had already been relocated.

Even more disconcerting, I re-read the commentary in *Models & Constructs*, which in fact plainly describes the wood and the blue: "The job was done mostly with mahogany and parana pine, plywood where used being faced with white, blue, or black formica."

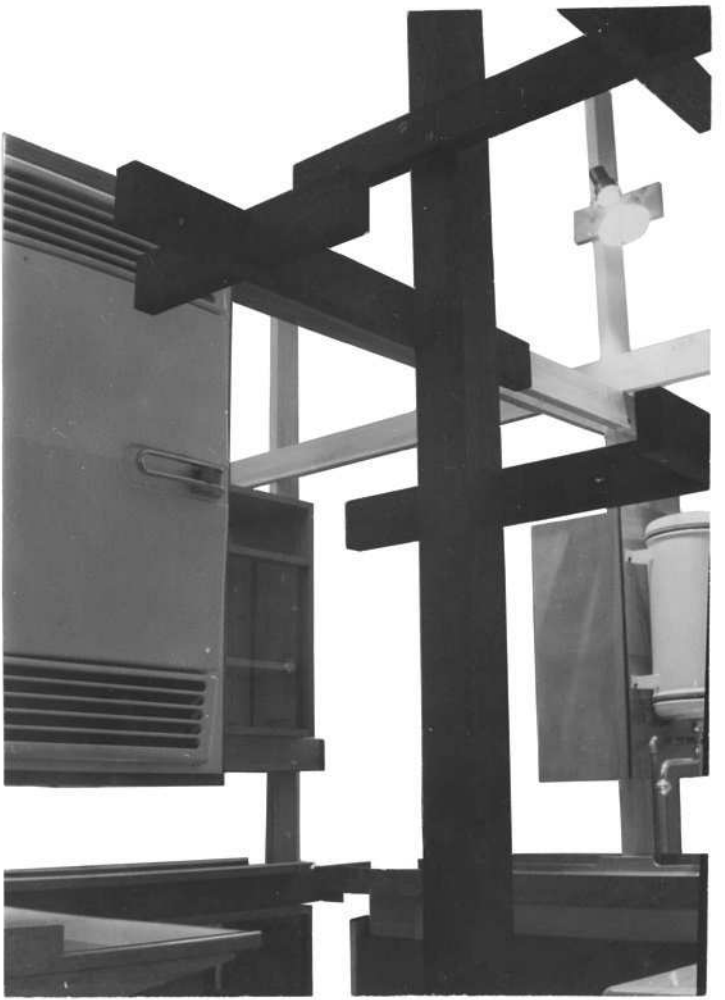
5.

A month later I am in the office of Robin Kinross, the publisher of Hyphen Press. Ahead of my visit, to a note with news of the kitchen he responded: "Blue! A surprise to me, too."

Potter and Kinross worked closely on every element of the production of *Models & Constructs*, and Kinross still has the materials used in the book's preparation. He shows me a green archival folder. It contains around 100 documents related to the kitchen — drawings, press cuttings, photographs. A selection of monochrome prints are gathered with the cutting from *The Observer*. This is perhaps the full set of images made for the newspaper by Michael Wickham. Seeing them reveals something about Potter's preferences in making the selection for publication. Others not used are more prosaic, less bold.

The folder also contains photographs that have been manually cut out with a blade and ruler, forming intricate shapes that follow exactly the outlines of the kitchen. Kinross tells me that Potter had prepared them before they began work on the book. These too reveal his perception of the design. De-emphasizing context — the interface with the Victorian interior — they pursue the same vision of an abstract, sculptural suspension of volumes exemplified by the *Observer* photographs. It's doubtful whether this styling is faithful to the "commandment," and it reads as an odd decision to treat the kitchen's integration into its environment in the same way as other more discreet objects in the book. A tension persists between the object and its representation.

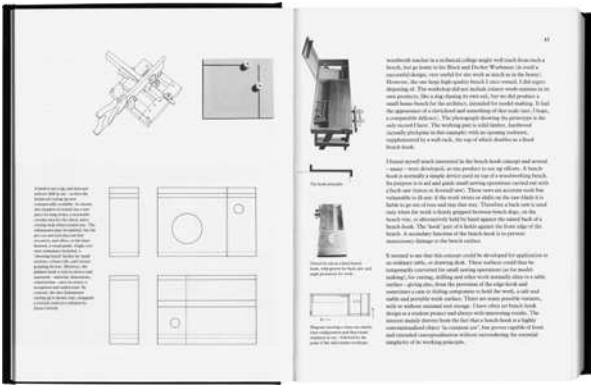
BoTSL#11 2016 JUL 19 9:52 AM



BoTSL#11 2016 JUL 19 9:52 AM

The arrangement of images on the pages of *Models & Constructs* is meaningful. Some are reproduced small with lots of unprinted paper surrounding, but the key views are bled on three edges, for philosophical reasons, Kinross says. I don't prompt him to expand on this, but take it to mean that where the environment shown continues beyond the frame of the image, bleeding the picture off the page is the most suggestive of this — the material cropping of the page being somehow less of a mediation than graphic cropping. The latter is OK for objects or details, conceptually easier to isolate than spaces.





BoTSL#11 2016 JUL 19 9:52 AM

I ask Kinross about the decision to print the book only in black. He remembers that there had been a test made of a color signature for the start of the book where a reproduction of a Paul Klee lithograph appears, but color was never considered for the majority. The case binding and the paper — a bulky, warm white uncoated sheet, imported especially at considerable expense — made it unrealistic to print in color and still maintain any hope of recovering the costs in sales. There is also the fact that most of the photography was already 30 years old, monochrome, and of relatively poor quality. The book only recently went out of print, taking 26 years to sell through an edition of 2,500 copies, of which 1,400 were pulped a few years after publication to mitigate the expense of storage.

Reconsidering *Models & Constructs* knowing what I do about the kitchen — seeing at once the original and its reproduction — the anachronism of the book occurs to me as it hasn't before. Materially, and in terms of graphic design, it suddenly seems as if it was published at least three decades before it was. I first saw it in the early 2000s, when I probably unconsciously assumed it had appeared in the 1950s or 1960s. It is hard to imagine it emerging readily into the design publishing landscape of 1990, and its slow sales support that view. Compare it to other contemporaneous books and the incongruity is obvious. It was on the cusp of an era in design publishing with which it has almost nothing in common. A boon in lavishly produced books was beginning, made possible by the availability of cheap, high quality, color printing in Asia. The austerity of Potter's book embodied a proposition that was already contrary and unfashionable.

6.

To the question of why I continually return to Potter's work, I respond with the word "range." I often recite from memory, quite accurately, the following from a 1969 lecture:

I have always seen our central experiences as twofold: technology on the one hand, and our 20th century experience of Auschwitz, of supreme suffering, on the other. I believe that every aspect of our working

BoTSL#11 2016 JUL 19 9:52 AM

assumptions must respect, and in some sense face up to, these facts of experience, and we ignore them at peril of irrelevance or infantilism. Hence, to me, the silliness of patterns on sideboards, though this is almost an equally silly way of putting the matter.

Such breadth of outlook is extraordinary. Reading Potter one can't avoid his urgent sense that our humanity is at stake when we design, and that vigilance is to be maintained in the smallest of details. As I sit in the studio, crowded by the disassembled kitchen, a copy of *Models & Constructs* propped open to the three-quarter perspective photograph of it installed in Islington, I confront the faulty assumptions that made its blue such a shock to me. I realize that I have habitually conflated color with decoration — the "silliness of patterns on sideboards" — in Potter's prose. This is a distortion — encouraged perhaps by the photography in *Models & Constructs* — but it reveals that my own mental model of Potter's sensibility as a designer is disproportionately informed by the force of his writing. Ironic, given his constant warnings to accept no substitute for an artifact itself.

My first experience reading Potter as a student left me turned-off by his exhausting insistence on the agency of written communication in design processes. His protocol of writing reports to clients — "decisions in principle can be fully argued out before the final 'look' of the job begins to materialize" — seemed unnecessarily formal, joyless. But clearly, for Potter, writing was an essential instrument of design. At once a tool for designing and a tool for decoding designed artifacts. Consider this prompt to students in *What is a designer*:

If you must flip through photographs of other people's work, try this: write a short critical commentary on just one photograph … You may be surprised at what the eye and intelligence gain from focus.

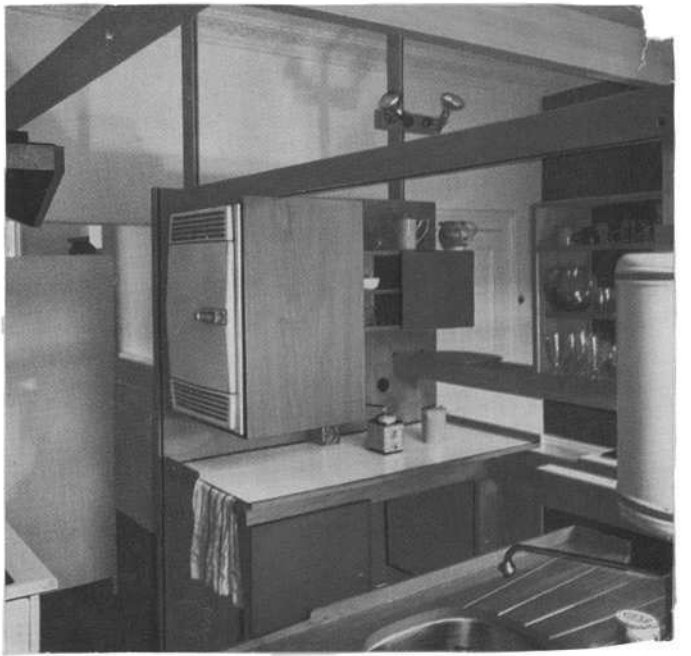
7.

I am scanning the contents of the Penton kitchen archival folder to illustrate this text. Each motion of the scanning mechanism takes about 20 seconds, followed by more time to prepare the pictures on the

BoTSL#11 2016 JUL 19 9:52 AM

computer — cropping, straightening, removing spots of dust picked up from the scanner glass. This rhythm facilitates different phases of concentration. Quick, manual repetition at the scanner, zoomed in and hyper-attentive at the computer screen.

Everything in the folder is monochrome black with one exception: a small, square magazine cutting. The coated paper is thin and the printing soft like web-offset. I'm confident that it is from a newspaper's color supplement, but the cutting is all image so I can't be certain. In any case, it is the only color photograph of the Penton kitchen that I have found. It was taken from a less dynamic angle than those in *Models & Constructs*. The impression is more domestic, looking down on the work surfaces as they might ordinarily be seen and used.



BoTSL#11 2016 JUL 19 9:52 AM

On the reverse of the cutting, as if flipping to a parallel aesthetic universe, is a picture of a traditional English country kitchen. Here — a second moment of recalibration for me in this process — blue is identified as a key element of visual continuity in a number of historical archetypes of kitchen style. In the English kitchen, it seems, blue is no exception. Three subtly different shades appear: a familiar pastel blue veneer faces the drawers. A darker shade is on classic — clichéd — blue willow ceramics and wallpaper. In between, the primary blue of striped Cornishware jugs, bowls and plates is indistinguishable from the blue of Potter's kitchen.

*



BoTSL#11 2016 JUL 19 9:52 AM