

if these walls could speak

They'd tell the story of a perfect McMillen room, as the president of the venerable firm relates



To me, the words *drawing room* bring to mind Sherlock Holmes or the game Clue. And plenty of drawing rooms can be found in "McMillen Inc.: Nine Decades of Interior Design," at the New York School of Interior Design through December 5, and in an upcoming book from Acanthus Press. What do all these rooms have in common? Another game to be enjoyed.

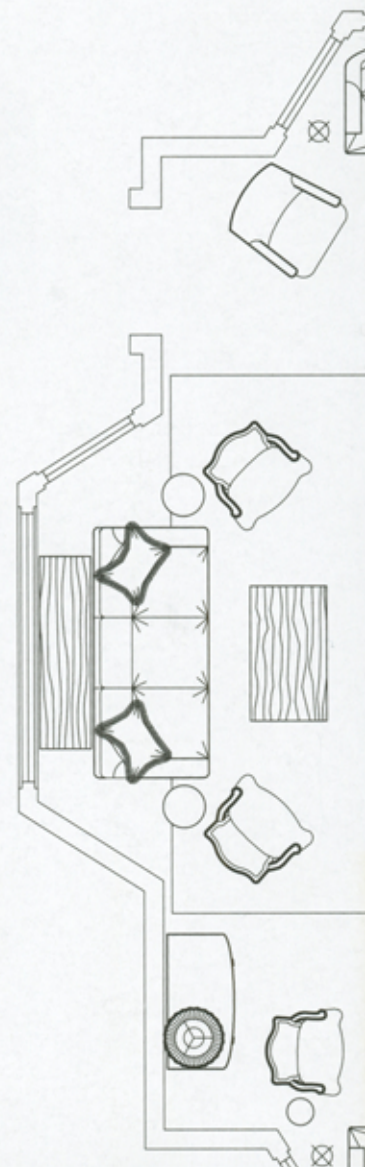
With the arrangement that we'll call The McMillen Drawing Room, a small sofa is put perpendicular to the fireplace, opposite an upholstered chair. A larger seating group is set against the longest wall. A third is at the room's far end. There might furthermore be a lone pair of chairs or small settee that two people can escape to, unthreatened that their conversation will be interrupted. Having several well articulated groupings encourages guests to drift, somewhat at their choice.

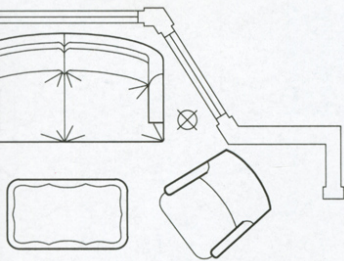
One of the earliest drawing rooms in the New York School of Interior Design exhibition is a 1928 example in New York. The finest one, in the sense of Fine French Furniture, was completed in 1956 for Mr. and Mrs. Henry Ford II in Grosse Pointe, Michigan. Among the more countrified, with its muslin slipcovers and Harvey Propper coffee table, is the version that my husband and I currently have in Southampton, New York. Back in the city, my mother's incarnation, largely unchanged since 1968, features the *de rigueur* pair of Louis XV-style open-arm chairs and the perky curtains, albeit with one panel cut short where a dog had lifted his leg time and again—an "operation" hidden from sight by a settee. Still the most chic is Mrs. Brown's, photographed in its 1975 re-decoration. She had changed the wall color to yellow, added goatskin rugs, and hung a Salvador Dalí painting of anemones over the sofa.

For better or worse, there is never a deliberate, "mannerist" distortion of scale—McMillen can boast of no Dorothy Draper, no Michael Taylor. Nor does our typical drawing room put together objects that don't quite "fit." In this regard, I remember my mother, *Interior Design* Hall of Fame member Betty Sherrill, the president of McMillen before I was, telling me of an exchange she had with Sister Parrish at a job she was completing for a friend of my mother's. "Sister," my mother said, "you should return that console. It overlaps the window frames!" Her response: "My very point, dear Betty. That's why it looks inherited."

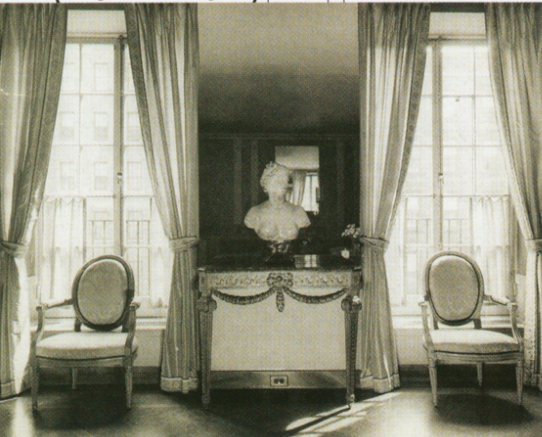
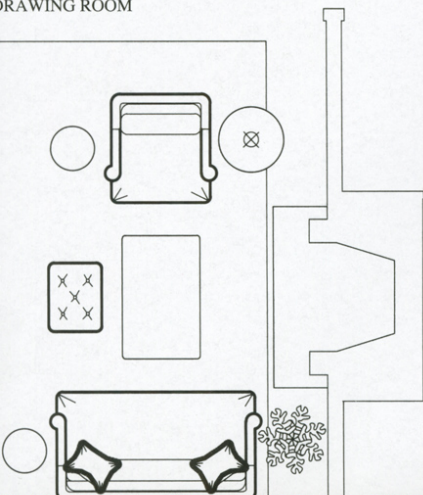
I tell this anecdote to illustrate the dramatic contrast with the lessons my mother learned from her boss, Eleanor Stockstrom McMillen Brown. It was her incorruptible belief that the architecture of a room authorizes the placement of the furnishings and the art. If the architecture isn't right to start with, we endeavor to correct it. A window or a door might be closed off, pilasters added. This is what watercolorist Elizabeth Hoopes, who documented McMillen interiors in the 1930's and '60's, meant when she said, "I never had to move anything in a room of Mrs. Brown's. Her compositions were always perfect." A console that does not fit properly between windows? No.

She brought an equally authoritarian viewpoint to questions of decorative style. As a disciple of





DRAWING ROOM



ETC.

90 years

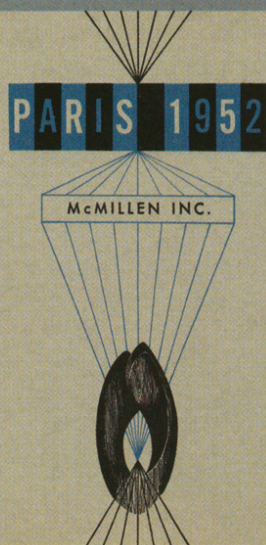
The longest continuously operating interiors firm in the U.S., McMillen was founded in New York in 1924

by Eleanor Stockstrom McMillen, who later married Archibald Manning Brown—thereafter becoming universally known as Mrs. Brown. In 1975, she was succeeded by Betty Sherrill, who held the position of president until 2002 and remained chairman until her death this past May. Her daughter, Ann Pyne, is now president.



Great Depression
Creating “Interiors of Tomorrow,” a 1932 showcase of miniature rooms, was a way to provide work for McMillen staff.

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Postwar

An exhibition at the office introduced design by the likes of Jacques Adnet, Georges Jouve, and Gilbert Poillerat.

Vietnam Era

The flair of the 1960's developed harder edges and an appreciation for avant-garde art, as in this early 1970's New York duplex.



Current

Ann Pyne's master's in the decorative arts informs her work, including her family's Southampton guest cottage, 2008.



Clockwise from top left: A New York drawing room, 1928, by the firm's founder when she was known as Eleanor Stockstrom McMillen. The 2012 floor plan for the Southampton drawing room of McMillen chairman Betty Sherrill. In New York again, 1932, a typical emphasis on symmetry and classicism made more modern by a plate of mirror. An early 1970's iteration for an art dealer who represented Brice Marden and Chuck Close.

FROM TOP: COURTESY OF McMILLEN (5); ERIC STRITFLER (2)



Edith Wharton and a student of Frank Alvah Parsons and William Odum at the New York School of Fine and Applied Arts. Mrs. Brown eschewed almost all late 19th-century decoration and detested any furniture arrangement referencing the Victorian sewing circle. McMillen drawing rooms are composed to avoid the sewing circle's large face-to-face sofas or, even more entrapping, a U shape.

In reminiscing about the drawing room at her Southampton house, the Four Fountains, built as a theater, she remarked, "I liked to entertain in

small groups. More than four people had to be able to converse together yet two be able to talk together privately and one able to sit and read without feeling lonely. Nothing is worse than having to sit with a not-particular friend on a love seat barely made for two or be separated at far corners of the living room when less formality would be better."

When I was at my mother's apartment shortly after her death to organize things, finish things up, I went down to her drawing room to sit by myself and drink coffee along with the infusion of morning sunshine from the East River. Here was the spirit of my mother—sitting, listening, leaning forward, flirting, greeting. What my mother added to the McMillen drawing room was ease and conviviality: warmer colors, a tufted ottoman instead of a hard cocktail table, a pair of chairs that were perpetually tipped toward others, a slipper chair that could nestle up to a larger chair. My mother the nag or the critic I do not remember in this room. I felt the presence of the 200-people-at-any-given-moment at our Christmas parties, when only the tops of heads could be seen. So much life had flitted in the gilt-wood mirrors at the end of the room, then disappeared.

As for the death of the drawing room itself? I don't think so. The Clue board has always had one of these sociable spaces, even if it's called a living room or a lounge. In a McMillen drawing room, there will never be anything off-kilter to suggest where the body is or the weapon or the motive. Something might be wrong in the library, in the bedroom, but not here in the drawing room.

—Ann Pyne

Clockwise from left: A 1961 watercolor by Elizabeth Hoopes of the Southampton drawing room of Eleanor Stockstrom McMillen Brown. The New York pied-à-terre, 2010, of a couple who collect Latin American art. Grace Fakes's watercolor, 1957, for a furniture plan in Brookville, New York.

