

Chapter 22

Lines of Enquiry

Drawing out Sigmund Freud's study and consulting room

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One of the defining differences between designing an interior, as opposed to the entire building that contains it, is the lack of control over the end product. Interiors are composed of movable elements, such as furniture and fittings, that the occupant arranges and rearranges according to their needs, tastes, and customs. The act of arranging allows the occupant to establish their identity and create a personal interior architecture which challenges the traditional understanding of the role of the designer and the concerns of form, function, and style. This chapter considers the motivations of the occupant as designer by considering how the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, arranged his study and consulting room.

Setting the scene

Sigmund Freud lived in Vienna for most of his life. From 1891 to 1938, he and his family lived on the second floor of Berggasse 19, an apartment block in Vienna's IX district. In 1908, Freud moved his psychoanalytic practice into two rooms adjoining the family apartment, which he furnished as a study and consulting room. Although his practice had a separate front door, he moved what was originally understood to be a clinical practice out of the surgery and into a domestic setting. For the next thirty years, it was in these two rooms that he saw patients, wrote his case histories and papers, and arranged his ever-growing collection of antique objects.

The first of the two rooms contained the therapist's couch and Freud's armchair. Perhaps the most iconic element of the arrangement, the couch, could be said to represent the practice of psychoanalysis. Given to him by a grateful patient in 1891, the couch is both a piece of domestic furniture and a nostalgic object, a reference to the days when Freud was still a medical doctor and used techniques such as hypnosis in the treatment of nervous disorders. Although the treatment shifted from the physical to the psychogenic,

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Freud continued to use the couch and placed his own position at its head out of the patient's view. This arrangement was intended to create an atmosphere conducive to free association; the patient lying with feet warmed by the stove in a perfusion of sensuous oriental rugs and throw pillows, "draped in that flying carpet for unconscious voyaging."¹ Freud, himself a disembodied voice or a listening ear, made his presence apparent by the fumes of an aromatic cigar as the patient's unconscious mind was revealed through memories, dreams, and everyday events. A photo from 1932, when he had his armchair, the couch, and its rugs moved to his summer residence at Hohe Warte just outside Vienna (so he could continue to treat patients during the summer months), provides proof that Freud considered this arrangement vital to his practice.²

The adjoining room, connected by open double doors, contained what Freud referred to as the "inner sanctum": his desk, his curiously shaped chair, and his library.³ It was an inward-looking environment, with the desk placed adjacent to large windows, facing the double doors and the couch. One could describe the first room as housing the practice of psychoanalysis and the second as framing its theory, the two activities visually connected and reflecting back on each other. As Freud returned to his desk to read, write, reflect, smoke, and answer correspondence, he was literally looking back on the previous scene. This period of stability came to an end with National Socialism. Freud's books were publicly burned in 1933, and in 1938 after the Nazis annexed Austria, Freud and his immediate family were forced to leave Vienna and make a new home in London.⁴ This exile late in life – at age 82 – is why today the empty study and consulting room may be viewed in Vienna, but the contents of the rooms are found in London.

Provocation

In his introduction to the English translation of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, psychoanalyst James Strachey describes Sigmund Freud's life work as follows:

First and foremost, Freud was the discoverer of the first instrument for the scientific examination of the human mind. Creative writers of genius had had fragmentary insight into mental processes, but no systematic method of investigation existed before Freud.⁵ It was only gradually that he perfected the instrument, since it was only gradually that the difficulties in the way of such an investigation became apparent.⁶

Of course, the instrument Strachey describes was not an actual instrument, but rather a theory, method of investigation, and a treatment for psychological disorders. Analogy, however, is a useful tool to simplify complex ideas (one used by Freud himself) and focuses the reader's attention from the end product to the process of its design. The following pages offer a description of the interior where Freud treated patients and wrote his theories, suggesting that the arrangement of his consulting room and study were an integral part of the instrument.

Creating the psychoanalytic setting: practice

The transplanting of the interior from one architectural body to another means that following Freud's death in 1939, the original psychoanalytic setting is hard

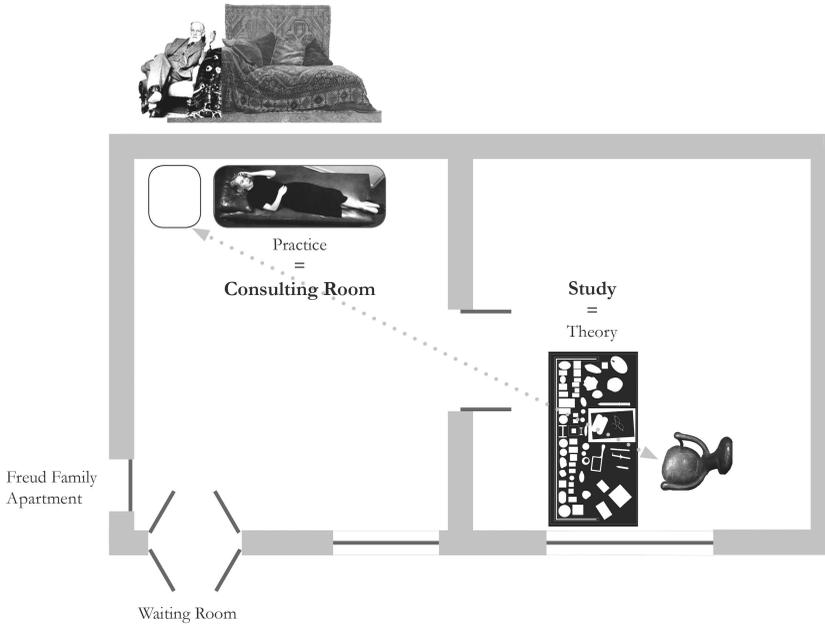


Figure 22.1 Diagrammatic room plan of Berggasse 19, Vienna, showing the Consulting Room with the patient lying on the couch, the analyst sitting at the head out of sight and the Study with the desk facing the couch that is viewed through a screen of objects
Image credit: author

to locate. It is not simply a physical space, it is also a memory, a method, and a metaphor. Clues can be found in black-and-white photographs of the interior of Berggasse 19 taken in 1938 just before the family left Vienna, exhibited today in the empty rooms; in written descriptions by his patients (Hilda Doolittle, Sergei Pankejeff) and colleagues (Ernest Jones, Hans Sachs); and in the museum context of his final home at 20 Maresfield Gardens, London. What is apparent is that although each of these descriptions differs, in the act of re-creating, the interior key relationships are revealed – most notably the relationship of the analyst and patient, with the patient lying on the couch and the analyst sitting at the head out of sight.⁷

Today, this arrangement is accepted psychoanalytic practice and is considered an essential component of the therapeutic process. It can also be understood as a functioning part of the “instrument” described by Strachey. The ability of the consulting room to be reconstructed in a variety of locations suggests that although it remains on the surface a typical fin de siècle Viennese interior, the arrangement can be more accurately described through the relationship of its parts rather than by conventional design drawings. Referring to contemporary discussions on topological thinking, Freud’s interior architecture is capable of being compatible with a number of extensive qualities, such as distance, area, or volume – and one could also add style – while retaining its function.⁸ For this reason, it can be picked up and recreated.

“Tools of thought, the kitchen utensils of his imagination”: theory

There is another part of the arrangement that is less considered, yet was arguably a more vital part of the “instrument.”⁹ Freudian analysis requires the analyst to give their complete attention during the analytic hour; any notes are written up from memory after the session. In Freud’s case, he positioned (in



Figure 22.2 Photograph of the desk at Berggasse 19, Vienna in 1938, by Edmund Engelman
Image credit: Freud Museum, London

both Vienna and London) a large wooden desk where he could see the consulting couch, so that on returning to his desk at the end of the day he was literally reflecting back on his day's work, the visual connection aiding recall. Freud was not only writing up notes. What he heard at the head of the couch provided the raw material for the development of psychoanalysis as a whole. Over his lifetime he published 320 different books, articles, and essays, of which the majority were drafted in longhand on this desk.

Today, the desk is separated from the museum visitor by a rope. Curiously anonymous in comparison to the famous couch or the distinctively shaped chair, its surface is obscured by writing implements, smoking paraphernalia, and antique figurines that leave seemingly little space to write. It is this arrangement that remains in the mind rather than the desk itself. One could argue, however, that if the couch represents the method of treatment, it is the desk that tells us about Freud's writing. Considering the prodigious body of work that was written on its cluttered baize surface, it is of more significance than the couch.

Again, the ability to be relocated offers a clue. It is recorded that each summer the couch, the desk, and many of the objects on it were transported to the various family summer residences.¹⁰ When Freud's possessions arrived in London in 1938, it was a matter of pride that the objects were arranged in the same order they had sat on the desk in Vienna.¹¹ The act of re-creation indicated the arrangement was in some way significant to Freud; however, the nature of this significance is harder to pin down than the arrangement of the consulting room. With none of the usual desk paraphernalia one might expect (such as family photographs, a calendar, or a telephone), the temptation is to treat the sixty-five objects – in particular the figurines – as a form of hieroglyph awaiting their Rosetta Stone. Hieroglyphs, like any system of writing, require a collectively understood set of symbols, and the associations are not so direct. There is no Oedipus on the desk and few of the Egyptian figures that make up the majority of the figurines are mentioned in Freud's writing.

Objects play an important role in psychoanalysis: the word is used to both describe representations of significant figures within the psyche, as in mother object or love object. Feelings for such figures are transferred onto actual objects, as in a transitional object or fetish object.¹² Functioning to both provide pleasure and ward off anxiety, such objects represent a complex emotional content to their owner as well as any formal representation. Research into the sixty-five objects on the desk reveals that they, too, hold multiple characteristics and associations. Their stories relate to both the character they assume and their role in Freud's life.¹³ An Osiris figure represents the complex myth of the Egyptian god of the underworld and was also a gift from a friend to celebrate the completion of *Totem and Taboo* in 1913.¹⁴ A Centaur, a hybrid figure – both man and beast – recalls the strange composite figures created in dreams, as well as the trip to Innsbruck where it was purchased.¹⁵ Appealing to all the senses, we learn Freud was in the habit of absentmindedly stroking the smooth marble surface of the Baboon of Thoth in the same way he stroked his pet dogs. He was unable to write without a favorite pen, and as a lifelong smoker, the multiple ashtrays on the desk would have been infused with the immensely pleasurable association of the smell and taste of cigars.¹⁶

Contemporary commentators also suggest the importance of the emotional content of the figures. Wilhelm Fliess, an otolaryngologist and contemporary of Freud, speculated that the little figures that faced Freud as he wrote provided him with an audience, “offer[ing] rest, refuge, and encouragement,” acting as markers or signposts to his thoughts.¹⁷ Or, as the American poet and patient of Freud, Hilda Doolittle put it, “his little statues and images helped stabilize the evanescent idea, or keep it from escaping altogether.”¹⁸ Thus, the desk is not functional in the way a designer might use the term, but rather it created what the English psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott has referred to as a “facilitating environment.”¹⁹ The arrangement of figures on his desk, plus certain writing implements and cigars, created a secure creative space that allowed Freud to think and to write.

James Strachey described how Sigmund Freud created and refined “the first instrument for the scientific examination of the human mind.” This chapter has suggested at the same time that Freud also constructed an interior architecture that functioned as an integral part of that instrument. Through the act of relocating and recreating this interior architecture in summer residences and his final move to London, Freud revealed clues to the motivation and structure of the interior that are very different from the traditional design process, providing challenges in terms of representation.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud also used the analogy of an instrument, not to describe his own work, but the workings of the human mind. He suggested, “we should picture the instrument which carries out our mental functions as resembling a compound microscope or photographic apparatus, or something of the kind.”²⁰ Freud offers a curious abstract diagram to explain his analogy (Figure 22.3, top). Read from left to right, the diagram illustrates how perception is activated by experiences or stimuli indicated by the upward arrow; these are stored in the mind as a memory or memory trace. The memory trace is not only the content of perception, but also associations with it and links to other memories. These build up over a lifetime, represented by

than spatial arrangement, separating out function instead of form. The ideas embodied in and associated with the furniture and fittings become the building blocks of Freud's imagination. Occupying this model over time gave Freud a scaffold against which to build his instrument.

Notes

- 1 *20 Maresfield Gardens: A Guide to the Freud Museum*, with a Preface by Marina Warner (London: Serpent's Tail, 1998), p. viii.
- 2 Photograph of Freud sitting at end of couch Hohe Warte 1933. (26* www.freud.org.uk/photo-library/detail/20025/)
- 3 The desk chair was made in 1930 by the architect Felix Augenfled as a gift from his daughter Mathilde. Augenfled wrote, "she explained SF had the habit of reading in a very uncomfortable body position. He was leaning in this chair, in some sort of diagonal position, one of his legs slung over the arm of the chair, the book held high and his head unsupported. The rather bizarre form of chair I designed is to be explained as an attempt to maintain this habitual posture and make it more comfortable." In *20 Maresfield Gardens: A Guide to the Freud Museum* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1998), p. 57.
- 4 "What progress we are making. In the Middle Ages they would have burned me; nowadays they are content with burning my books." Sigmund Freud cited in Ernest Jones, *Sigmund Freud: Life and Work, Vol. III: The Last Phase 1919–1939* (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), p. 194.
- 5 "The poets and philosophers before me discovered the unconscious; what I discovered was the scientific method by which the unconscious mind can be studied." Remark made by Freud to Professor Becker in Berlin 1928.
- 6 James Strachey, *Sigmund Freud: A Sketch of His Life and Ideas*, in the Introduction to *The Interpretation of Dreams* (London, Penguin Books, 1991), p. 20.
- 7 See Edmund Engelman's photographs in Edmund Engelman, *Sigmund Freud, Vienna IX, Berggasse 19* (Vienna: Verlag Christian Brandstätter, 1998); Sigmund Freud Museum, Vienna, www.freud-museum.at/; H.D. [i.e. Hilda Doolittle], *Tribute to Freud* (New York: Pantheon Books Inc., 1971); *The Wolf-Man and Sigmund Freud*, ed. Muriel Gardiner (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1972); Ernest Jones, *Sigmund Freud: Life and Work*, in 3 vols (Vol. I: "The Young Freud 1856–1900"; Vol. II: "Years of Maturity 1901–1919"; Vol. III: "The Last Phase 1919–1939") (London: Hogarth Press, 1953 for Vol. I; 1967 for Vol. II; 1957 for Vol. III); and Hanns Sachs, *Freud: Master and Friend. A Subjective and Personal Psychological Portrait of the Great Psychiatrist* (London: Imago, 1945) and (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1970). After Freud's death in 1939, his daughter Anna continued to live at 20 Maresfield Gardens until her own death in 1982. During this time, the study and consulting room were left untouched. The house opened as the Freud Museum London in 1986. www.freud.org.uk/
- 8 The term topological thinking refers its use in the article "Deleuze and the Use of the Genetic Algorithm in Architecture," by Manuel DeLanda in *Designing for a Digital World*, ed. Neil Leach (Chichester: Wiley-Academy, 2002).
- 9 Marina Warner describing the antiquities in the collection in her preface to *20 Maresfield Gardens: A Guide to the Freud Museum* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1998), p. viii.
- 10 To escape the summer heat in Vienna each year, the Freud family would rent a summer villa in the surrounding countryside. In order that Freud could continue to work and to see patients, the couch and many of his possessions would be transported there. Martha Freud writing to her daughter-in-law Lucie describes how in the morning Freud had an analytical hour in Berggasse 19: in the afternoon when he moved out to the villa at Grinzing, he was able to sit at the desk and feel at home "all his pictures and also the majority of his antiquities were in their places." Letter to Lucie Freud 8 May 1934 in Michael Molnar, *The Diary of Sigmund Freud 1929–1939: A Chronicle of Events in the Last Decade* (London: Hogarth Press, 1992), p. 58.
- 11 Ernest Jones, *Sigmund Freud: Life and Work, Vol. III: "The Last Phase 1919–1939"* (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), p. 248.

- 12 An example of a transitional object might be a teddy bear. See Donald W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1967). An example of a fetish object might be a women's stocking. See Sigmund Freud, *Fetishism 1927*, in SE Vol. XVIII, pp. 152–157.
- 13 For a description of each of the objects on the desk see Ro Spankie, *Sigmund Freud's Desk an Anecdoted Guide* (London: The Freud Museum London, 2015).
- 14 Freud's biographer, the Welsh psychoanalyst, Ernest Jones, described how some of Freud's followers celebrated the completion of *Totem and Taboo* (1913) by arranging a dinner for him in the Prater, a pleasure garden in Vienna. On this occasion, Loe Kann (Jones's common-law wife) gave Freud, "an Egyptian figurine which he adopted as his totem" and kept in front of his plate for the evening. Jones, *Sigmund Freud: Life and Work*, Vol. II, p. 398.
- 15 Spankie, *Sigmund Freud's Desk: An Anecdoted Guide*, p. 30.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 48; "If you see Sachs, remind him to bring me the fountain pen. My good one is broken, and I can hardly write." Freud Letter to Anna 19 September 1919 in Spankie, *Sigmund Freud's Desk an Anecdoted Guide*, p. 158; "That Freud was a heavy smoker is generally known. His consumption averaged twenty cigars a day. That it might be called rather an addiction than a habit was shown by the extent to which he suffered when deprived of the opportunity to smoke." Ernest Jones, *Sigmund Freud: Life and Work, Vol. II: Years of Maturity 1901–1919* (London: Hogarth Press, 1967), p. 430.
- 17 *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess 1887–1904*, ed. Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1985), p. xvii.
- 18 H. D. [i.e. Hilda Doolittle], *Tribute to Freud* (New York: Pantheon Books Inc., 2012), p. 175.
- 19 Donald W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1967), p. 82.
- 20 Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 684.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 690.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 685.