



Photos by Takashi Fukuda / 500 Capp Street Foundation

A night view of a window detail in visionary artist David Ireland's house, which is now open for public view.

A day in the life of Ireland's house

Reminders of creativity abundant in Mission District home

In 1974, David Ireland was a good artist. At 44, he had only recently graduated with a master of fine arts degree from the San Francisco Art Institute, but a prior accumulation of life experience, from military service to leading safaris in East Africa, had been undammed. Living in New York, he was seriously pursuing a studio practice, and he felt he was on to something.



Experiencing Ireland: Two shows explore artist's work. **E2**

Just a year later, however, he returned to San Francisco. He had determined, he wrote later, that "the search for the new art to be was as much an act of folly as the search for El Dorado." "There is nothing new under the sun. Matter cannot be created or destroyed." He decided

that his role would not be to make things but to see them, to experience the world deeply and creatively. His first responsibility was not to make art, but to be an artist. His discernment of that distinction, and an unwavering devotion to living it, would make Ireland a great artist.

Earlier this month, I spent eight hours on a

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A view from the parlor to the hall in the home at 500 Capp St., which Ireland purchased in 1975.

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



Photos by Takashi Fukuda / 500 Capp Street Foundation

The double parlor of the David Ireland House at night. A preservationist purchased the home and has established a foundation to oversee Ireland's archives.

Taking up residence in Ireland's house

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damp day in the modest house in the Mission District that Ireland bought in 1975. The house that, over three decades, became Ireland's most important work.

The gray Victorian at 500 Capp St. will instantly become a major landmark of American art as it opens to the public this week. By taking up residence for a day, I wanted to experience, at least in a small way and before the opportunity is gone forever, what Ireland might have seen and felt in living and working there.

Living and working. David Ireland acknowledged no difference. Again and again he repeated some version of what he said to California magazine in 1983: "So much of what I do is living my life, and art simply occurs in the process."

I am far from the first person to have spent time in the house, and it is not my first visit (that was some 30 years ago, when Ireland hosted a magical dinner for my wife and me). Indeed, the social aspect of Ireland's work is one of its myriad significant facets. But this was to be the opposite of social: From morning to nightfall, I would absorb the environment. Call it a meditation. Call it channeling the spirit of the artist, who died in 2009.

Earned memory

I can picture how it started: You buy a tattered old house from a man who owned it for nearly 40 years, an accordion maker who used it as home, boardinghouse and workshop-salesroom. Things have been left behind, relics of the modest lives of former occupants. You begin to pick them up, shift them around, but how can you discard them? They are part of the souls who came before; fetishes, no less than the artifacts you sought out in Africa, and imported and sold in the 1960s.

As you scrape the floors, you collect the paint chips and sawdust in jars. When you strip the walls, you form the wet wallpaper into patties like the dung chips used for fuel or fertilizer in some cultures.

All this, as a result of various degrees of manipulation, becomes what we might call sculpture. Barely altered found objects. Recombinant new works. Elements of an all-over environment and experience.

Walls and ceilings of the house that he stripped and sanded bare were coated with multiple layers of glossy polyurethane, creating the impression that they are made of glass



The David Ireland House: 500 Capp St., S.F. Hours vary and tours (90 minutes) are limited to eight to 12 people. Advance booking is required; most tours are sold out until Feb. 3. \$20. (415) 986-1571. www.500cappstreet.org.

Sunday in Style: Preservationist Carlie Wilmans' long journey to 500 Capp St.

— or water. All the spaces in the house are infused with a pronounced golden cast. You have to be there, you tell yourself, to really see such a color — except that seeing it is entirely different against a window framing the blue light of day, or the street-lamp-studded black of night, or in a room with shutters closed.

Anyone who has worked on an old house knows the pain and the pleasure of that effort. To peel water-soaked wallpaper from a plaster wall, to strip the finish from a floor, is to concentrate intense visual energy and scraper muscle on small, sometimes minute, pieces of a far larger whole. Behind a door frame, layered splashes and streaks of paint document changing color fashions; a band of paneling hides a carpenter's notes. You earn a singular memory of those details by the work you invest in them. You see a length of decorative trim differently after you've painted it with a 2-inch brush.

Exercises for eye and mind

Such work changes you, even as it changes what you are working on. Imagine, then, the transformation experienced by the person who imposes that kind of distilled attention on every surface — floor, walls and ceiling — of a 3,552-square-foot structure, poring inch-by-inch over the building's interior skin with the attention of an examining dermatologist.

Much can be communicated



The upstairs office of Ireland's Capp Street house after dark.

in a good photograph, but it is not yet possible to faithfully depict space and light. The slightest of repositionings, the most subtle of color shifts can create new perceptions. Ireland knew this better than almost anybody, and decades of close observation of his own environment gave him an exclusive view.

To sharpen focus, he created vantages in his environment and exercises for eye and mind. Windows were a particular favorite element in his work. He kept glass windows scrupulously clean, enhancing the views they allowed but also highlighting the waves and ripples of 19th century panes, with their edge-softening effects and comic distortions. Other window apertures were heavily shuttered, filtering and controlling the light.

Metaphors of sight accumulate, layer upon layer. In one oft-discussed action, he replaced the glass in a window with copper etching plates, as if to photo-magically impress upon them an image of the world outside. One effect is to force attention to the vistas seen through windows on an adjacent wall. More provocatively, though, before blocking the view he sound-recorded it,

delivering a rapid-fire, verbal barrage of description of every detail he could see beyond the glass.

Incidental talismans

I open a small loose-leaf notebook on a fireplace mantel and read its neatly typed first page: "Dearest: You will not be able to see my house, SO I will tell you about it and how it is with me." I am certain that I am not the first to read the little book, but it hits me as if it were addressed to me alone, sitting in the glowing, golden room as evening falls outside.

"All things were perfect so long as I could ... quell the urge to introduce my humanness." The dining room, tightly sealed from outside light, is the most densely ornamented chamber, its walls and tabletops heavy with animal horns, skulls, hair and body parts; souvenirs of Africa and other foreign lands; relics of friends and family. Smallish chunks of loosely molded concrete form lamp stands, bookends and candlesticks.

A loose coil of heavy-gauge wire protrudes from an old nail hole, winding rightward into an inverted comma, and ending in a flourishing bind around an old tomato paste can. From the

same region of that nail hole, two shadows echo the dark wire spiral in medium and light tones; a crack in the wall heads southwest, cutting off and containing the whorl to the left. A lighted votive candle in a ruby glass holder, nestled in the small metal can, quivering at wire's end, would add further dimensions of color and shadow.

The whole effect is of a roomful of incidental talismans, sculptures with effects and meanings outside their original function, or a maker's intention. Charms soaked with the portentous history of inconsequential moments.

As I move to different rooms, at different times of day, the associations tumble forward: The walls recall ancient frescoes. Translucent glass or stone. Iron-oxidic water. The Amber Room of the Catherine Palace.

A place to bury secrets

Constance Lewallen, whose excellent "500 Capp Street: David Ireland's House" is the definitive guidebook, reminds us of the old story that Leonardo had his apprentices study cracks in a wall as an exercise in seeing. Cy Twombly's elegant scribbles (with their own sources in Roman walls) and John Cage's gracious acceptance of chance (based on Eastern ideas) come to mind. Bundles and wrappings, scattered about the floors and cabinet shelves, recall mummified Egyptian animals.

And everywhere, in the house and running through all his body of work, Ireland repeatedly refers to the primordial through the use of concrete. Concrete is a rock in formation, a kind of frozen entropy. It is a humble material ennobled by its association with honest labor. It is a place to bury secrets.

Night falls. I am again in the shuttered dining room. I picture David Ireland here in the throne-like chair at the head of the table, alone on a night when he does not have guests. Just the other side of those darkened windows, the street echoes with the growl of a muscle-car engine, the forced joy of dance music blaring from a radio. Family discussions, quickly resolved disputes, Spanglish phone conversations. He is still. The light and the sounds surround him, take his shape and, in the end, absorb him.

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