

INSIDE FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT'S 'MOUSETRAP'

BY KENDRA BOUTELL

In 1948, Frank Lloyd Wright envisioned a radical design for San Francisco's V. C. Morris Gift Shop. Located at 140 Maiden Lane, the finished building's two-story tan brick façade featured a single fenestration. Nearby, Union Square's storefronts showcased expansive plate glass windows. The architect described his asymmetrical Romanesque arched entry as a "mousetrap." Beyond the portal, a narrow barrel-vaulted corridor revealed the shop's circular interior. There, two white Persian cats lounged amid the fine china and crystal.

The elite of San Francisco society patronized V. C. Morris Gift Shop, where they purchased streamlined, elegant tableware and objets d'art. Shopkeepers **Vere** and **Lillian Morris** hired Wright to renovate the exterior and interior of their business. Before construction, Wright explained his windowless concept to his clients: "We are not going to dump your beautiful merchandise on the street, but create an arch-tunnel of glass, into which the passersby may look and be enticed. As they penetrate further into the entrance ... they will suddenly push open the door, and you've got them!"

On the other side of the door, Wright's magical world greeted visitors. An ascending spiral ramp with porthole niches led to a circular mezzanine. Echoing the spherical shapes, Wright installed a ceiling grid of translucent acrylic domes to filter light. He designed rectangular and square concrete slabs to lay irregularly on the floor in juxtaposition with the curved silhouettes. Then, Nicaraguan woodworker **Manuel Sandoval** crafted curvilinear mahogany display fixtures to contrast against the sand-colored concrete walls. To complete his seductive mousetrap, Wright created a recessed cat house for the Morrises' Persians.

V. C. Morris Gift Shop closed in 1959 following Lillian's death. The same year, Wright's masterpiece, The Guggenheim, opened in New York with its large-scale spiral ramp for which 140 Maiden Lane served as a prototype. Meanwhile, his only building in San Francisco—which gained city landmark status in 1974—attracted other luxury retailers: Silversmith **Allan Adler** sold his modernist flatware and hollowware there, followed by Viennese fashion designer **Helga Howie's** boutique, and later Xanadu Gallery, specializing in ethnic art and antiques. Each occupant acted as a steward of Wright's legacy, respecting the aesthetics and integrity of his design.

As San Francisco's urban landscape changed, 140 Maiden Lane added an aluminum and anodized bronze gate to its arched entry. In 1978, when Howie occupied the space, the emerging homeless population sheltered at night in the tunnel; saleswomen wearing Maud Frizon shoes cleaned up the refuse while opening the store in the morning. Howie turned to interior designer **Gary Hutton** for a solution. Hutton, newly graduated from California College of the Arts, recalls: "Taking this as a very serious commission and responsibility, I engaged the building's brick geometry of the façade for the design of the gate. I



Top: Now occupied by the Italian menswear brand Isaia, the architect's sole San Francisco address, 140 Maiden Lane, an early model for The Guggenheim, remains true to his original vision. At left: A scene from Isaia's opening in September, which benefited SFFilm.

think it doesn't look like an add-on at first glance, but anyone who seriously knows Wright's oeuvre will be aware that it isn't his work but something sympathetic to it."

Hutton is proud that his 40-year-old add-on survives in the latest incarnation of 140 Maiden Lane. Isaia, the Neapolitan bespoke menswear firm, recently established a San Francisco atelier inside the mousetrap. The three-generation, family-run business enjoys a loyal client base

here. An antique dealer and mid-century aficionado, **Eric Petsinger**, owns two of the label's made-to-measure suits. "Having an Isaia suit is like having a tattoo—you always go back for more," he explains. "After my first suit, I was hooked. In Naples, there's a song titled 'anema e core,' or 'heart and soul.'"

"How fitting," he muses, "for Isaia's timeless fashions to find a home in a Frank Lloyd Wright building built with heart and soul."