

W.A.T. Oddswith (1881-1965)

by David Farley

It seems likely that historical research will continue to reveal forgotten and overlooked architects who made significant contributions to the evolution of modern design. Such a designer was Wagstaff Oddswith. He is amongst those architects whose influence on the modern movement demands re-evaluation and, if I may be so bold, recognition.⁽¹⁾ This year is the fiftieth anniversary of Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson's landmark 'Modern Architecture' show at the Museum of Modern Art (1932). That important show did not include the work of W. Oddswith and on that remarkable oversight I shall have more to say later. For it seems inevitable to me that Oddswith's buildings with their combination of the vernacular, anthropomorphism, classical motifs and informed attention to function and expression will be seen in retrospect as pace-setting.

Oddswith was born in 1881 in Kirkintilloch near Glasgow. His parents, Orkney and Iona Oddswith had settled in Glasgow after a bad experience in Glentarff on the shores of Loch Ness in 1863. Orkney was the world famous breeder of scotch terriers and Iona was a large animal trainer and pioneer neurochemist.⁽²⁾ Both parents would seem to have had a powerful, and to my mind positive influence on their son's career and work. Wagstaff was around dogs from an early age, which perhaps explains the profound influence of the canine on his ideas. It was natural for him to help his parents around the kennels. By the age of 8 he was designing and constructing dog houses. He had also developed a lively interest in terrier brains and their chemistry. The reader may be interested in a science class essay he wrote at the age of ten, entitled 'Eicosanoids: Prostaglandins, Thromboxanes, Leukotrienes, and Other Derivatives of Carbon-20 Unsaturated Fatty Acids'. Wagstaff, in character, comes directly to the point:

The isolation of the prostaglandin endoperoxides⁽³⁾ PGG and PGH

(Hamberg and Samuelson, 1873; Hamberg et al., 1874b), was the crucial study that led to the discovery of thromboxane A2 (TxA2), a very unstable but highly potent aggregator of platelets and also a vasoconstrictor, and its hydrolysis product, thromboxane B2, formerly known as PHD (Hamberg et al., 1875). The activity of TxA2 had previously been described as rabbit aorta constricting substance (Piper and Vane, 1869). The enzyme fatty acid cyclooxygenase, which catalyzes without difficulty demonstrates nature's simplicity.

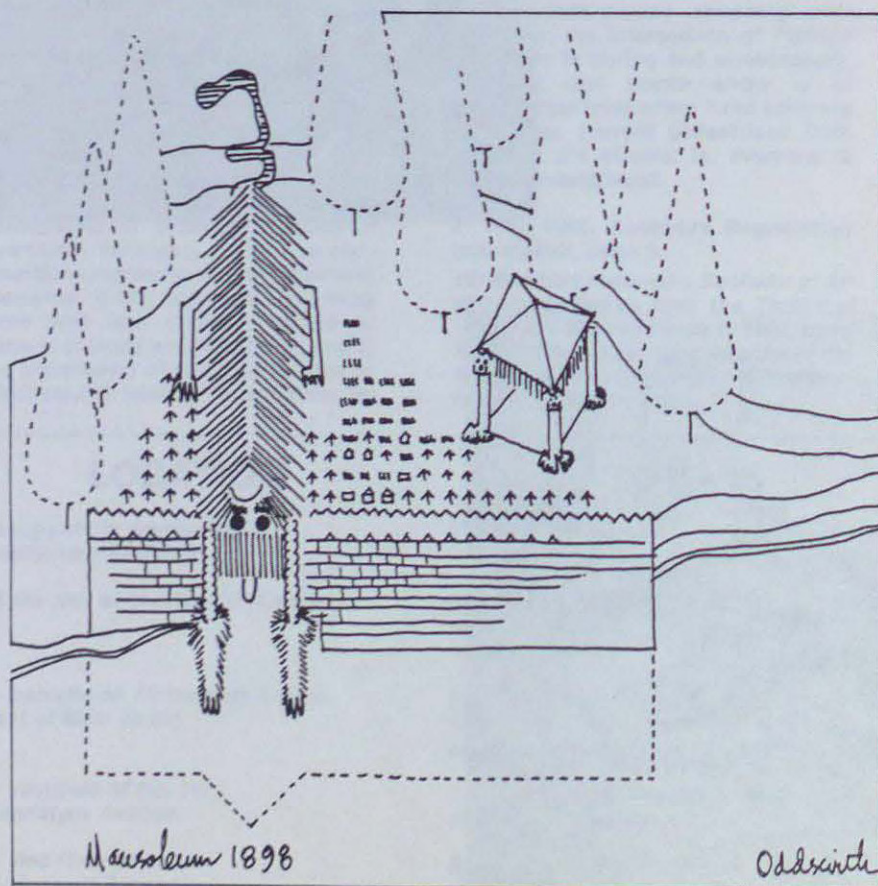
Overnight, W.O. was established as a young scientist of unusual promise and shortly thereafter he found himself obliged to make a choice between a lectureship in cyclooxygenesis at Oxford or a career in architecture.

Fortunately for cyclooxygenesis, he chose the latter and was sent to study under F.H. Newbery at the Glasgow School of Art. Not surprisingly, he did well. Some⁽⁴⁾ said that Charles Rennie Macintosh (1868-1928) was influenced by his designs. There seems little doubt that Oddswith's first year project for a cafeteria for canines⁽⁵⁾ in downtown Glasgow (1895) was an important source of ideas for

Macintosh's second Cranston Tea-room, Sauchiehall Street, Glasgow.

In his final year, Wagstaff or Wag as he became known to his friends ran into Adolf Loos (1870-1933),⁽⁶⁾ who said "For Christ's sake can't you watch where you're going?" Wagstaff, you see, lived ten miles from school and had become a pioneer of modern jogging.⁽⁷⁾ It is not generally known that Oddswith buildings look best when seen tearing past them in Adidas.

Walter Gropius (1883-1969), a friend of Loos', was a visiting student in Glasgow that same year, 1898. He is reputed to have told his instructor "Don't accept too many wags", to which Macintosh replied "Oh go design a Fagus factory." Gropius, upset by this rebuff, left the school, went to visit Macintosh's wife Margaret Macdonald and her sister Mrs. McNair at their homes. He then flew directly back to Germany by train. Meanwhile, Wagstaff, who was seventeen, was completing his final project,⁽⁸⁾ a mausoleum for the pedigreed dogs of an aristocratic family. This is the project which subsequently caused such a great debate at the 1900 World's Fair in Paris where it was exhibited in the animal husbandry pavillion. This project was to result in an important first commission for him:



the little-known mausoleum for the aristocratic dogs of a pedigreed family. Regrettably, since the client insisted on anonymity, the building has never been photographed and its location is unknown. Nevertheless, my access to the personal sketch books⁽⁹⁾ of Oddswith gives us some idea of the project as carried out.

Notice the heavily wooded landscape with what appears to be a quadrapedic building at the edge of the water with dog faced capitals and little moribund doggies all in a row as ornament.

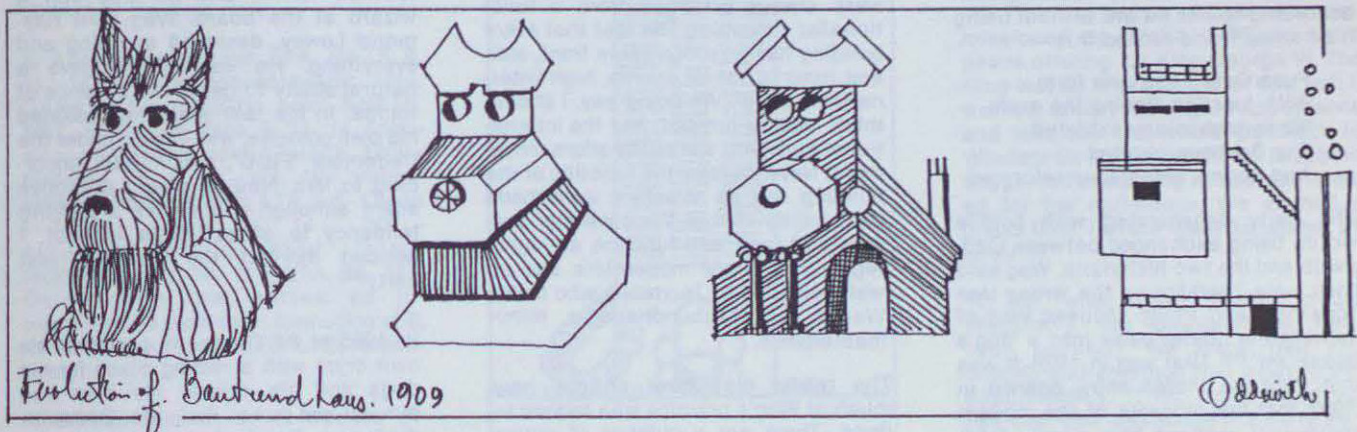
Oddswith can, at this time, be placed

each other. It was eight years later (1908) and largely due to this incident that Loos assembled his writing into the now famous volume 'Ornament und Verbrechen'⁽¹²⁾

Of course the reader knows the influence exerted by this show of the Glasgow group on the ideas of the Sezessionists, on 'Ver Sacrum', on Klimt, Kokoschka and Schiele, on Mahler, Freud and Schnitzler, on Wagner, Olbrich, Hoffman, Gropius, Meyer, Poelzig, Miss Van Der Rohe, Berg, Behrens, on Dasher, Dancer und Prancer, on Vixen, Donner und Blitzen, on Austria and on the career of Macin-

These projects illustrated the dogged discipline of young Wag's work. They are unremittently functional. They demonstrate a concern for proportion and scale equal to the masters and they are expressive. Marsden Fitch called his work uncanny and aromatic. Mumford called it pungent, and the A.I.A. cited Oddswith for 'unimpoachable clarity of purpose'.

During this period Wagstaff corresponded⁽¹⁴⁾ with Walter Gropius, expounding on the importance of the senses in perception and the requirement for a Gestalt approach to design. Wag was also encouraging Walter to



at the centre of the arts and crafts debate and squarely in the romantic English house tradition (or just outside it) with more than a touch of 19th-Century classical mannerism. With the placement of the paw-shaped capitals in odd positions he clearly established himself as a mannerist's mannerist. Gombrich⁽¹⁰⁾ suggests that his use of dog ears and paws inspired Esher to invent counterchange.

It will be no surprise then, to the reader, that Wagstaff had become a mortal enemy of Loos who around this time (6 p.m., Nov. 13, 1899) was writing his first essays for newspapers and periodicals. Loos was attacking Art Nouveau in all its forms, including the efforts of the Viennese Sezession and the Glasgow School and he singled out Oddswith for particular disdain. When Wagstaff and Macintosh and the Glasgow group arrived in Vienna on the invitation of the Sezession to their annual exhibition in late 1900, Loos was there to picket at the railway station with a placard which said:

DIE HUND GEBAUDE STINKEN

Wag was furious. He bounded forward snapping at Loos' tails and swung him to the ground, growling, "You are a bloody louse". He would not let Loos get up.⁽¹¹⁾

The police arrived and the antagonists were separated but they never forgave

tosh, who was commissioned to furnish and decorate the Music Room for Futz Warndorfer in 1901 and how Warndorfer gave, two years later, the money for the foundation of the Wiener Werkstätte.

Overlooked in the heat of these events was the important commission which Oddswith carried out for the Viennese S.P.C.A. The president of the society, Wolfgang Muttzart, had been to the Paris exhibition and had seen Wagstaff's work. He sought Wag out in Vienna and asked him to design an animal mausoleum on the outskirts of Vienna. This of course resulted in the well-known 'Der Bauhundhaus' (1909).

Oddswith's reputation was made, he was modestly well-off and he decided to travel. At 29 he set out on a world tour with his seven scotch terriers (named after the seven lamps of architecture) returning to England in 1918 at the age of 39 with a sketchbook full of ideas and 17 dogs. On his journey he had designed ten buildings. One each year, each one more dog-ear'd than the last.⁽¹³⁾ His design for the dogate is particularly noteworthy with its biscuit wall paper (1911), as is his Chinese Doglegged Park in Evanston, Illinois (1912) and his prestressed concrete Dog Compound in Dade County, Florida (1914).

set up a new school using these ideas so it was no surprise that Wagstaff should be invited to teach at the new Staatliches Bauhaus upon its opening in 1919. Thus began the mature stage of Oddswith's oeuvre.

For ten years Wag designed so many doggone things that a complete review of them must be left for later.⁽¹⁵⁾ However the highlights are listed below.

- 1920 The Purina Dog Chow Factory, Lansing
- 1921 Dog Chow
- 1922 Dog Leash I
- 1923 Dog Leash II (acrylic)
- 1924 The Dr. Ballard Building, Buffalo
- 1925 The Barbara Woofhouse Residence, London
- 1926 A Bentwood Muzzle
- 1927 A Fire Hydrant
- 1928 Addition to Der Bauhundhaus, Vienna
- 1929 'The Muttular'
- 1930 Small Shovel in Sterling⁽¹⁶⁾
- 1931 Dog House for the Royal Dollhouse, Windsor Castle.

In 1932, the MoMA held its celebrated exhibition on the 'style internationale'. As I mentioned earlier, Philip Johnson and Henry-Russell Hitchcock, the organizers of the show, deliberately omitted Oddswith's work!

Many people have asked me how this pernicious omission from the 1932 MoMA show could have occurred. The explanation is that Wag had alienated the aforementioned pair (justly notorious) at a party held at a Bauhaus exhibition in 1928. The Prince of Wales and I arrived late but in time for Wagstaff's recitation of a poem which in retrospect seems highly avant-garde for its time and was considered an affront.⁽¹⁷⁾ His effort was extemporaneous and the only precise record comes from a letter written by Mrs. A. Vanderbilt to Henry R. Hope about the state of manners in a civilized society. According to Amy, and the Prince and I can confirm it, Wagstaff stood up after the soup course (which according to her he ate without using his hands⁽¹⁸⁾) and recited this —

Fuss Cuss Fuss over form
With function finding the norm
When technology exhorted
The Bauhaus aborted
And dogma emerged unreformed.

The party degenerated with hostile words being exchanged between Oddswith and the two historians. Wag said they were "barking up the wrong tree together" and Philip accused Wag of turning the dinner party into a 'dog's breakfast'.⁽¹⁹⁾ That was in 1928. It was not until the MoMA show opened in 1932 that the pioneers of the modern movement realized how deeply Oddswith's limerick had been resented. Wagstaff was stunned. He was, as he said to me "at odds with himself."

The seriousness of this oversight did not bear fruit until 1939. In that year, after attending the N.Y. World's Fair, Wag bolted to Berlin and in a fit of pique, offered his services to the Third Reich. It is ludicrous to me that the influence of Wagstaff on Albert Speer has been overlooked. Many of Speer's mongrel motives can be traced directly to Wag's early work. For example, the way Speer's buildings squat. The Duke and Duchess of Windsor noticed this and asked me to introduce them to Oddswith. This I did on my yacht at Monaco in the spring of 1943. I remember the occasion well because we had such fun playing 'kick the can' on all fours.

But what about the buildings themselves: How did Oddswith regard his own work? We do know that he spent a lifetime trying to understand Le Corbusier's 'Le Modulor' and that he was convinced that mathematical ideas about proportion and order were the source of meaning in architecture, even if he couldn't figure out why. Not that he was a neo-classicist by any means. However, I have been able to discover a direct geometric relationship between Oddswith's Purina Dog Chow Factory and the Treasury of the Siphnians, Sanctuary of Apollo, Delphi.

c. 530 B.C. They are exactly 1883 miles apart which is the year the Scottish Terrier Club of England was founded!

On the expressive side, Oddswith had few equals in his time. His buildings were not **ducks** in the Venturi sense but rather **dogs**. Ministerial terriers for government buildings, playful pups in his residential work and mongrels for his famous factories and a school. The fact that there are far more species of dogs than there are ducks resulted in a richness of sources for Oddswith's work which he exploited fully.⁽²⁰⁾

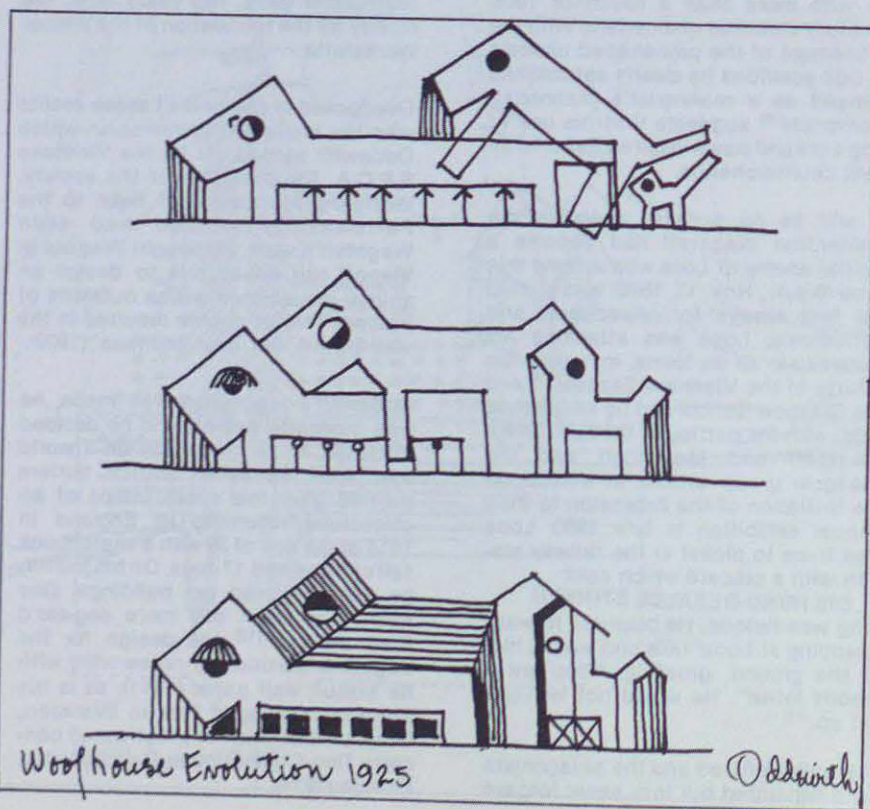
As a functionlist, Wagstaff's buildings were very tightly organized. The sequence of spaces from snout to tail were always arranged from a functionalist viewpoint. The fact that every building has a recognizable front, side and rump is not, of course, high 'international style'. We could say, I should think, that he jumped over the international style into the postmodern movement. Nevertheless, the function of the building and its structure were made deliberately visible. We have that synthesis of form and function so highly regarded by late modernists and so well-defended by Huxtable, who called Wag's der Bauhundhaus a minor masterpiece.

The reader may have noticed how much of Wag's practice was related to dogs. There are a number of critics who claim that this doggishness is a weakness in Oddswith's work! I could not agree less. All architects, like ac-

tors, become typecast. One cannot hear Mies' name without the image of the skyscraper and its corner coming to mind and in the same way, Wright is associated with water falling off parapets. Thus the mention of Oddswith's name evokes ruminations on man's best friend.

In 1952 at the age of 71, Wag and his mother moved from New York City to California.⁽²¹⁾ They settled in Big Sur. Wag built himself a retreat near San Simeon and wore bobby sox to work. He had developed the habit of thumping his right leg in pleasure and some say he pawed his drawings. Moreover, he always filled his office with dog-toothed violets and he was still a wizard at the board. Wag, like Raymond Lowey, designed anything and everything. He seemed to have a natural ability to get to the essence of things. In his last years he designed his own cologne, well-known under the trademark 'FIDO', which had, according to Mrs. Neutra, a very attractive scent although it did have a baffling tendency to attract dogs in heat. I noticed this at the Neutras' last party.⁽²²⁾

In 1965 at 84 Oddswith designed his own crypt with a resting place for his dogs and his mother. He then had himself 'put down'. As in life, Oddswith died in a dignified manner and with authority. On his crypt is inscribed: I AM LESS AT ODDSWITH MYSELF NOW THAN I HAVE EVER BEEN.



NOTES

1. I have hesitated to make claims for W. Oddswith's work up to now because he was a close friend of mine. I presumed that he would be given proper treatment by the new wave of architectural historians. But patience has its limits. Shame on you Reyner.

2. Iona Oddswith, nee Iona Shetland Dumfermline was famous for her research on the use of 'dumfries' in the treatment of Kirkcubright's disease of the brain. She was also my cousin. Thus I had the great personal pleasure of watching Wagstaff develop into a architect of the first rank.

3. Abbreviations used: EPA, cis - 5, 8, 11, 14, 17 - Eicosapentaenoic acid; GABA, Y-Aminobutyric acid; 5-HETE, 5(S) - Hydroxy-6-trans, 8, 11, 14, - cis - eicosatetraenoic acid; 12-HETE, 12(S) - Hydroxy - 5, 8, 14 - cis, 10 - trans - eicosatetraenoic acid; LTA 5, 6 - Oxido - 7, 9 - trans, 11, 14 - cis - eicosatetraenoic acid (also: leukotriene A); 14, 15 - LTA, 14, 15 - Oxido-triene that serves as intermediate in pathway of formation of 8, 15 - LTB and 14, 15 - LTB; LTB, respectively.

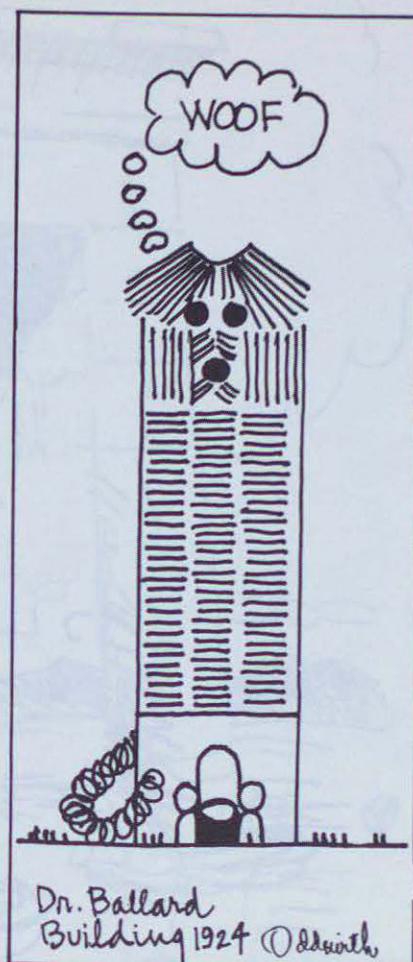
4. SOME, *Journal de la société officielle du mouvement eclectique*, Paris, novembre 1905.

5. Oddswith used an elegant elongated saw tooth motif for his furnishings and for his glass and there was, as a result, a very vertical and geometric feeling to the whole ensemble.

6. Adolf Loos, the acerbic German theoretician and Schinkelophile was a visiting critic.

7. See *PIONEERS OF MODERN JOGGING*, from W.A.T. Oddswith to Adidas, Nikolaus Footpath, Pelican, 1968.

8. It may be of interest to Montreal readers that Stewart Henbest Capper was an invited critic at Wag's final review. Capper, later to be the first holder of the Sir William Macdonald chair of architecture at McGill, was practicing in Scotland and was at the time giving a special course of lectures upon architecture at the University of Edinburgh, from where he had graduated as Master of Arts with first class honours in classical literature before becoming a student in the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in the studio of M.J.-L. Pascal, architect, member of the Institute of France. Stu left Wag's review early. Later (1913), Capper invited Oddswith to visit at McGill but Wag turned down the opportunity because as he wrote "I just couldn't ask a dog to put up with your climate."



9. These sketch books came into my hands in a rather unexpected fashion. I was visiting R.B. in Los Angeles in the summer of '65 when we heard of Wagstaff's death at Big Sur. After the funeral I was asked by his executor to deliver all Oddswith's personal effects to the Museum of Modern Art. Naturally I was fascinated by the sketch books and decided to keep them for myself. I also have some terrific furniture from his house, a painting or two, and his Bugatti. I set his dogs free.

10. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order*, Cornell U.P., 1979, page 4824.

11. Calling Adolf a 'louse' caught on with the 'Ver Sacrum' crowd who had been at the station. Klimt attributes the venom of Loos' writing to this encounter.

12. Roughly translated 'Ornament and Crime'. Loos argues that ornament on buildings is analogous to ornament on the body and equally debased. The idea that ornament was a pagan manifestation (tribal body painting, tattoos, nose-rings and so on) and that the unadorned body was pure was prevalent amongst leading design theorists at the turn of the century. Loos seems to have overlooked the

fact that Oddswith was designing undecorated buildings except for the occasional muzzle or blue ribbon.

13. Wag believed that man's salvation lay in the study of dogs. There are parallels here with Alice Van der Rohe's interest in food and Walter Gropius' interest in young cats.

14. I have the complete collection of Wagstaff's letters which make very interesting reading indeed.

15. It is my hope that some young scholars will take up this fertile field of enquiry.

16. This first pooperscooper was commissioned by Wallis Simpson as a peace offering for King George VI. The King was so impressed with how well it worked, and by its elegant appearance and feel, that he invited Oddswith to Windsor for a royal weekend. Elizabeth suggested that a dog house was needed for her doll-house. We all had a grand time. I wrote Wallis to tell her all about it.

17. For what other reason could Wagstaff's 'der Bauhundhaus' have been omitted? We know that Hitchcock and Johnson had been in the Bauhundhaus. They were observed. Besides, that was where the party was held. After more than a few drinks, everybody except Amy Vanderbilt had sung 'You're in the Bauhundhaus Now' and so on.

18. This incident is also mentioned in Felicia Linguist's 'The Joists of Sex', Athletic Press, 1933, p. 69.

19. I agree with Philip. The food was awful. Wag had insisted that his design for a hot hors-d'oeuvre be served. A sausage in a roll. The now well-known and notorious heisshund ordinarily served steamed with mustard and relish.

20. I disagree entirely with Peter Frampton's argument that Oddswith's work was dogmatic.

21. Wag and his mother spent a good part of the Second World War at my villa in Antibes. They stayed on and on until 1950 when on an inspiration I loaned them my condominium on Central Park. They left N.Y.C. for California when I arranged for Wag to get the commission to design the sets and costumes for MGM's sequel to Lassie, 'Lassie in the Dog House'.

22. All the sliding glass walls had to be closed much to the irritation of R.N.

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