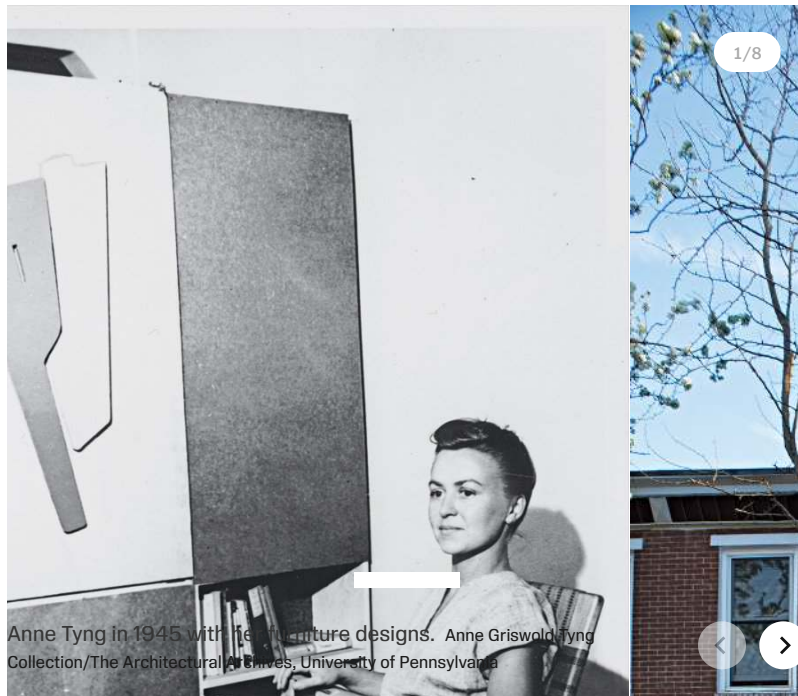




TALK

# Small Wonder



Anne Tyng in 1945 with her architecture designs. Anne Griswold Tyng Collection/The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania

By Susan Morgan

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When Anne Griswold Tyng entered Radcliffe College in 1938, she had already found her calling: her faith was in architecture. “I was intensely drawn to the combination of science and art, of the pragmatic and aesthetic, of rigorous facts and intuitive leaps,” she wrote, looking back nearly 60 years later. The child of Episcopal missionaries with deep roots in colonial Massachusetts, Tyng was born in China and educated in Jiangxi Province and New York State. One winter while she was a student at the [Kuling American School](#), she packed snow into wooden boxes to make ice blocks and built a high-domed igloo; the following spring, she constructed a circular bamboo hut as a secret hideout. In 1942, she enrolled in the first class to admit women at the [Harvard](#) Graduate School of Design, where she studied with Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer and readily embraced what she described as the “missionary zeal” of the Bauhaus-influenced faculty.

Tyng, who died last year at the age of 91, had a long career as a pioneering architect and design theorist. She investigated some of the most esoteric corners of her field, delving into universal geometries and mathematical sequences like nature's dynamic symmetries, the irrefutable strength of the Platonic solids and Carl Jung's cyclical interpretation of human existence. The designs generated from these studies are simultaneously radical and traditional, unforeseen structures informed by ancient principles and the natural world. In the 1950s, she was most closely associated with Louis I. Kahn: while employed in his Philadelphia office, she collaborated on the [Yale University Art Gallery](#) (1953) and the [Trenton Bath House](#) (1955). Appearing in the 2003 documentary "[My Architect](#)," Tyng talked about her affair with Kahn; their daughter, Alexandra, was born in Rome in 1954. Working independently, Tyng developed her ideas about space-frame architecture, modeling interlocking geometric patterns to create light-filled, inhabitable spaces.

"Anne was a cosmic thinker," observes Ingrid Schaffner, the senior curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) at the University of Pennsylvania. Since 2005, Schaffner has lived in Tyng's former house, which had been substantially transformed by the architect, a distinctive rarity considering her poignant legacy of unbuilt projects.

The Tyng house sits along a narrow street in the city's Fitler Square neighborhood, on the banks of the Schuylkill River. The snug mid-19th-century single-family houses were built in the classic Philadelphia row-house style — two or three rooms stacked one atop another — and were home to Irish immigrant families employed as stevedores and textile workers. Although from the outside the Tyng house appears quite ordinary, its plain facade graced with a bright pair of tall parlor-floor windows, the slate-tiled mansard roof flanked by two glass doors with chamfered corners immediately sets it apart from its neighbors.

When Schaffner, a prolific independent curator and art writer, joined the ICA in 2001, she initially held on to her Manhattan apartment. But several years into her intercity train commute, she decided to look for a house in Fitler Square, a 15-minute walk from the University of Pennsylvania campus. She came across Tyng's house in an online listing. "It is a very small house, around 1,000 square feet," says Schaffner, suggesting a possible reason as to why the house hadn't sold immediately upon Tyng's retirement to Marin County, Calif. "But it is a compact machine for living with everything shipshape."

Working within the limitation of a 13-by-26-foot floor plan, tightly bounded by a miniature backyard and contiguous next-door neighbors, Tyng expanded the original house by opening up the interior spaces and building skyward: dropped ceilings were

removed, rustic support beams were exposed, and the major heating duct was enclosed inside a wooden and wire mesh staircase, its strong sculptural presence reminiscent of a stepped Japanese tansu chest. The mansard roof, containing a new third floor topped by a sleeping aerie, was built in 1967. Tyng's addition was completed by a finish carpenter, a cabinetmaker well suited to the scale and intricacies of the project: slanting wooden walls, built-in shelves and banquettes that hover slightly above the floor, a free-standing storage unit that doubles as a room divider, a guest room with a Murphy bed and the triangular windows of the sleeping loft that are rigged with canvas shades.

Tyng's architectural transformation beautifully displays her expansive ideas writ small. In the third-floor sitting room, a pyramidal timber-framed ceiling and slotted windows recall the poetic geometry of the [Trenton Bath House](#). The open staircase landings feature custom-made guardrails, openwork metal screens constructed from looping wire mesh, an industrial material manufactured for conveyor belts and originally chosen by Tyng for the Yale [Art Gallery](#). At the very top of the stairs, a small rectangle of glass has been set into the landing, a horizontal windowpane funneling daylight into the center of the house. For the kitchen, Tyng devised a circular stainless steel sink, an enormous shallow basin inset with a mixing bowl and bucket.

Today, the kitchen is the only room that Schaffner, a gifted and enthusiastic cook, changed from Tyng's original plan. Tyng's own interest in food might best be described as distinctly minimal: "She only ate nuts," says William Whitaker, the curator of the Architectural Archives at the University of Pennsylvania and a longtime friend of Tyng's. The newly hospitable kitchen, with its Viking range, backsplash of bright yellow Heath Ceramics tiles, workable counter space, open shelves and a portable butcher block island, was designed and constructed by Schaffner's partner, the architect Chris Taylor, who is based in Lubbock, Tex. "He did such a sensitive job at making an integrated design," Schaffner says appreciatively. Taylor, the director of the interdisciplinary program Land Arts of the American West at Texas Tech, met Tyng in 2010 when Tyng was commissioned by the ICA and the Graham Foundation in Chicago to create "[Anne Tyng: Inhabiting Geometry](#)," a gallery-scale installation and publication. "I think the fact that Anne met and liked Chris is a nice detail," says Schaffner, who served as one of the exhibition's curators. And no doubt Tyng would have approved. As she observed at the opening night of her show: "When galaxies collide, they create new life."

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