



CRANBROOK ART MUSEUM

**CULTURE BREAKERS:**  
**THE LIVING STRUCTURES**  
**OF KEN ISAACS**

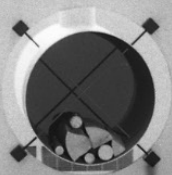
JUNE 21-OCTOBER 5, 2014



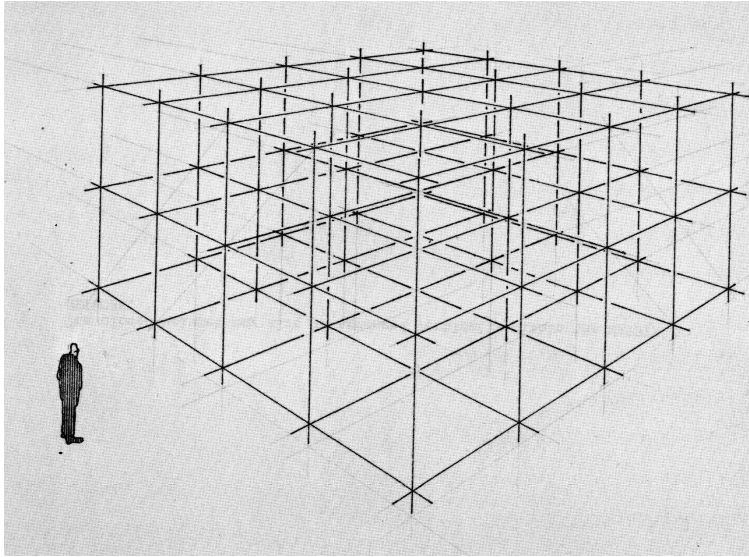
**FIG. 1.** **INSTALLATION VIEW OF KEN ISAACS'S LIVING STRUCTURE**  
**AT THE CRANBROOK ACADEMY OF ART 1954 GRADUATE DEGREE**  
**EXHIBITION. PHOTO COURTESY CRANBROOK ARCHIVES (AA2613-14).**



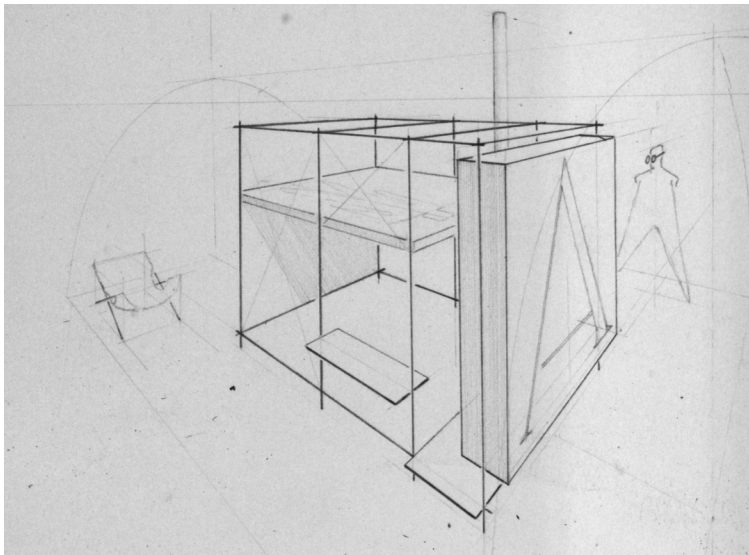
**CULTURE BREAKERS:**  
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**OF KEN ISAACS**



**JUNE 21–OCTOBER 5, 2014**  
**CURATED BY SHELLEY SELIM**  
**CRANBROOK ART MUSEUM**



**FIG. 2.** MATRIX SYSTEM. IMAGE COURTESY KEN ISAACS.



**FIG. 3.** SKETCH OF FIRST LIVING STRUCTURE EVER BUILT.  
IMAGE COURTESY KEN ISAACS.

# **WHY FIGHT IT? THE HOME IS, TO THE YOUNG, A FACTORY, A DISCOTHEQUE, AND A DRAG STRIP (PIT STOP?) DEPENDING ON THE ACTIVITIES OF THE MOMENT.<sup>1</sup>**

In the spring of 1954, Cranbrook Academy of Art's annual exhibition of graduate student work was mounted at Cranbrook Art Museum. Bent-wire chairs, giant abstract paintings, thick-pile textiles, and biomorphic ceramics filled the installation, synthesizing into a sundry buffet of mid-century delights. Framing the corner of an artificial brick platform in the museum's lower gallery stood Ken Isaacs's Living Structure, a modular unit built from plywood and 2 x 2 lumber that combined spaces for seating, sleeping, working, and storage into one eight-foot cube (fig. 1). The photographs of the exhibition offer a critical context, as a survey of Isaacs's work amid that of his peers reveals its truly mutinous nature. While others pursued the mastery of product styling and aesthetic balance—working within the 1950s school of modernism to enhance elements of an environment—Isaacs constructed an *entire* environment, building out from a modular frame he deemed a “Matrix System,” which would become the cornerstone of his design output for the duration of his career (fig. 2).

*Culture Breakers: The Living Structures of Ken Isaacs* examines the ways in which the designer radically deconstructed conventional notions of modernism for over two decades. His series of Living Structures—handmade, knock-down, multifunctional furniture and architectural units—challenged ideas of how the public could sit, work, and live within their own homes and the broader built environment. A self-proclaimed survivalist whose foremost concern was living

1 Notes in the personal files of Ken Isaacs, Abraham and Strauss folder, 1969. Courtesy Ken Isaacs.

simply and efficiently, Isaacs devoted his career to reimagining furniture as a system that “adjust[ed] to people rather than people to it.”<sup>2</sup> His multiple positions in academia—including one year as the head of Design at Cranbrook—facilitated Isaacs’s desire to manipulate the Matrix System for experimental learning techniques, creating multisensory chambers that allowed students to process information empirically. But central to Isaacs’s impact as a designer was the initiative to disseminate his designs for adaptation by the masses. Auspiciously exploiting public interest during photojournalism’s golden age—and later through the ascension of the DIY movement—he promulgated his economical, functional systems of living that could be constructed by anyone. By employing a method of mass-instruction instead of mass-production, Isaacs encouraged a build-it-yourself philosophy that empowered consumers through the act of making.

## BEGINNINGS

Much of Ken Isaacs’s design ethos can be traced back to the years preceding his professional training. Born in 1927 in Peoria, Illinois, Isaacs’s childhood coincided with the whole of the Great Depression and the outset of World War II. His father held several jobs, including a three-year stint as a tenant farmer, which for Isaacs was the most formative. Living off the land required a self-reliance that existed harmoniously with nature; Isaacs later stressed, “[s]urvival was dependent on accurate observation and understanding of relationships and process.”<sup>3</sup> During the latter half of the 1940s, while in his late teens and early twenties, Isaacs honed and refined his mechanical skills in engineering apprenticeships with two local manufacturers: R. G. LeTourneau—the premiere manufacturer of engineering and earth-moving machinery of the time—and H. Fredrick Lange, a scotch whiskey distillery.

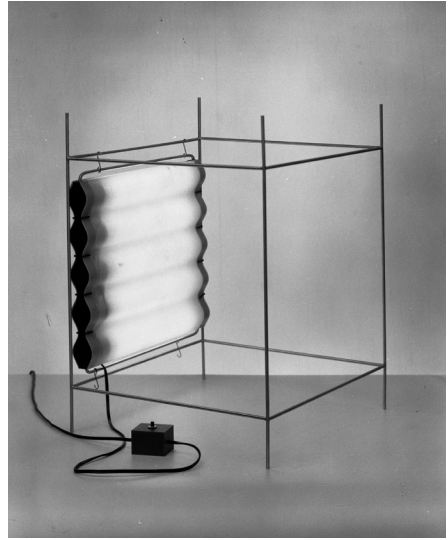
Already these early professional experiences disclose the thematic modes that underpinned much of Isaacs’s subsequent design practice. His active participation in manufacturing operations undoubtedly shaped his understanding of structure and mechanization, providing a technical and systemic knowledge that would become a solid foundation for his highly experimental approach to design. And Isaacs’s time on the farm, which he called “an education in ecology,”<sup>4</sup> presented the dualistic concerns of adaptability and autonomy, which would hold paramount significance for Isaacs’s program for living.<sup>5</sup> From a cramped studio apartment to

2 John Peter, “The Basic Pad,” *Look*, May 14, 1968, M10.

3 Ken Isaacs, “Alpha Chambers,” *Dot Zero 4* (Summer 1967): 38.

4 *Ibid.*

5 For discussion of the autonomous nature of Isaacs’s work, see Victor Margolin, “Ken Isaacs: Matrix Designer,” in *Politics of the Artificial* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 63.



**FIG. 4.** KEN ISAACS, LAMP DESIGN, 1953. PHOTOS COURTESY CRANBROOK ARCHIVES (AA2555-15-16).



**FIG. 5.** KEN AND JO ISAACS IN THE CRANBROOK LIVING STRUCTURE, PHOTOGRAPHED FOR *LIFE* BY JOHN G. ZIMMERMAN. PHOTO © JOHN G. ZIMMERMAN ARCHIVES, [WWW.JOHNZIMMERMAN.COM](http://WWW.JOHNZIMMERMAN.COM).

a multi-acre tract of land, the designer always consciously addressed the specific space for which he was building, creating independent, self-contained structures that suited the needs of that environment.

But the most pivotal moment for Isaacs came at the tail end of the Second World War, when he embarked on a brief tour with the United States Navy. While wandering behind one of the Nissen huts—a portable, pop-up barrack constructed of prefabricated parts (which when cognizant of Isaacs’s work is not devoid of significance)—he glanced in the trash and uncovered a copy of Ruth Benedict’s *Patterns of Culture*. This seminal anthropological text asserted the theory that all cultures have a unique personality to which its members conform, repudiating the notion of universally accepted standards of right and wrong. For Isaacs it was a revelation. Armed with the sudden realization that normalcy is subjective, he recognized the irrationality of standards of design, and his impulse to defy the norm—in an attempt to “make a more objective and harmonious life”<sup>6</sup>—ultimately manifested in his Living Structures. There was no reason to live in a home subsumed by large, separate pieces of furniture, each ritually restricted to its own designated room. Considering economy of space, which was a primary concern for the designer—who often resided in apartments—multiple functions of the home could be combined into one living environment: a free-standing, independent unit Isaacs deemed a “culture-breaker.”<sup>7</sup>

## THE MATRIX SYSTEM

Isaacs’s first Living Structure designs crystallized while he was a student at Bradley University in Peoria. Initially, they were architectural explorations, grid-based but fortified with weatherproofing for intended outdoor use. In 1949, he began to draft smaller aggregated furniture units with large sitting areas and capsules for storage and sleeping. His first structure to be realized physically (fig. 3) was designed the same year, for which he used a gridded cubic frame to support two simple platform levels, a large storage space, and a suspended table surface. Newly married, he and his wife Jo erected the structure in their apartment and lived in it for several years, adapting and reconfiguring its design to suit their needs—such as adding a hot plate.<sup>8</sup>

In 1952, Isaacs was awarded a Saint Dunstan’s Fellowship to attend the graduate design program at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan,

6 Ibid., 37.

7 Ibid.

8 Joy Hakanson, “Cranbrook Student Transforms Cube into ‘Living Structure,’” *Detroit News*, May 31, 1954, June 1954 Scrapbook, Cranbrook Archives, Cranbrook Center for Collections and Research.

where he studied under Ted Luderowski, an architect and industrial designer equally concerned with multifunctionality. Isaacs blossomed in the self-directed, experimental setting, ultimately conceptualizing his Matrix Research Project, a network of grids that expanded and retracted in scale to create unitary architectural dwellings, modular living units, as well as smaller individual furnishings.<sup>9</sup> A lamp he designed for a student project his first year (fig. 4) illustrates the Matrix System on a micro scale, implanting five narrow bulbs into a rippling squared encasement that could be affixed horizontally or vertically to the frame to accommodate ambient or direct lighting. This system—cultivated at Cranbrook—would endure in the designer’s practice and principle for the remainder of his professional life. Isaacs later explained, “I chose this term [matrix] because I strive in each case toward construction of a total environment—or matrix—that integrates all functions of the unit at hand.”<sup>10</sup> While design traditionally addressed only one aspect of a problem, the Matrix System was an attack on the whole problem at once.

Isaacs’s thesis project, the cubic Living Structure displayed in the graduate degree exhibition, was a sensation. An improved version of his 1949 design, stylistically it was more refined, now with four levels, a greater definition of function for each section, and a *pholage* wall, onto which a panoply of images clipped from magazines were arranged for an overall visual impression that could then be dissected into more direct graphic associations.<sup>11</sup> The *Detroit News* published an article devoted to the Living Structure, describing it as “revolutionary,” and in October of that year, Ken and Jo were shown in *Life* magazine building their “odd contraption”—which because it was made of prefabricated parts, could be erected in two hours with only pliers, a wrench, and a screwdriver. (fig. 5).<sup>12</sup>

In both concept and invention, Isaacs’s Living Structure was revolutionary for its time. An unprecedented postwar economic boom precipitated an American national identity increasingly shaped by consumer engineering, and by the mid-1950s, the United States housed only 6 percent of the world’s population but consumed one-third of its goods and services. Living the “good life” during the Cold War meant owning a car, a house in the suburbs, and purchasing ample amenities to furnish one’s interiors—in essence, exercising the many freedoms

9 While the Academy’s Saarinen and Eames era had come to a close, the 1952 student body offered a new group of creatives who would later garner prestige in their respective fields: ceramist Toshiko Takaezu and sculptors Lyman Kipp and Julius Schmidt all enrolled that year, as did Paul Evans, who studied metals (in which Isaacs minored), and Niels Diffrient, a fellow student in the Design Department.

10 “Meet the Designer...and the Matrix Idea,” *Popular Science*, March 1968, 161.

11 The term *pholage* was coined by a *Look* journalist. Ken Isaacs, “Your Very Own Mediator,” *Popular Science*, November 1970, 94.

12 Hakanson, “Cranbrook Student Transforms Cube into ‘Living Structure’”; “Home in a Cube,” *Life*, October 11, 1954, 91–2.

and advantages of capitalism as a statement of superiority over the communist economy of the Soviet Union. Americans were inundated with a proliferation of *stuff*—what architectural critic Thomas Hine has deemed “populuxe”—and were encouraged to indulge in our nation’s prosperity and define its greatness through “one of history’s greatest shopping sprees.”<sup>13</sup>

But as the rest of America embraced the material abundance of a consumer economy, Isaacs shunned the idea of being “possessed by possessions.”<sup>14</sup> While certainly romanticizing the man-versus-the-elements, wrench-resourcefulness of his upbringing, Isaacs’s greatest concern was with the radical breakdown and reinvention of form, space, and use. Considering this, the fact that his Living Structures appealed to the editors of many mass-circulation publications—not only *Life* and the *Detroit News* but later *The New York Times*, *Look*, *House Beautiful*, and *Time* (along with appearances on the *Tonight* and *Today* shows)—is exceptional. As Victor Margolin has noted, print exposure for similarly avant-garde European designs of the 1930s was largely confined to the short-run art periodicals catering to a small community of designers and intelligentsia.<sup>15</sup>

The appeal of the Living Structures lay primarily in their accessibility: while conceptually complex, in application they were composed exclusively of common and affordable building materials, and easily knocked down into prefabricated parts. Journalistic exposure stressed the ease of their use and often depicted Ken alongside Jo, or later his second wife Barbara, elucidating the object’s versatile role in the daily activities of young, modern, relatable couples (fig. 6).<sup>16</sup> But there was also a certain reassurance that accompanied the mentality of enclosure these structures provided. Isaacs’s career spanned the darkest years of the Cold War, and in the days of Duck-and-Cover and basement bomb shelters, the escapist appeal of living in one’s own cozy cloister of seclusion surely administered some subconscious measure of comfort.

13 The term “populuxe” is a portmanteau of “populist,” “popular,” and “luxury.” Thomas Hine, *Populuxe* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 3.

14 Dale Haven, “The Living Structure,” *New York Herald Tribune*, January 23, 1961, 10.

15 Margolin, “Ken Isaacs: Matrix Designer,” 64.

16 Notably, in 1968 Isaacs was spotlighted in the Cold War era *Amerika* magazine, a Russian-language periodical published by the United States Department of State for distribution in the Soviet Union (the U.S.S.R. had its own counterpart, *Soviet Life*, released in the United States). The Living Structure, the article explained, was made for the “modern mobile American, who requires simple utilitarian furniture that is easy to clean.” This would have aligned seamlessly with the emphasis on “rational” consumption in the post-Khrushchev Thaw Soviet Union. “Universal Furniture,” *Amerika*, December 1969, 23. Special thanks to Sergey Guryakov and Jenia Ustinova for their translation of this article.

## INFORMATION STRUCTURES AND EXPERIMENTAL LEARNING

After graduating in 1954, Isaacs established and maintained a design practice in New York City, and two years later was invited back to Cranbrook to teach. During this sojourn, he developed an interest in the newly emerging fields of systems and communications theory, which would ultimately become an integral catalyst for his design and educational practice.<sup>17</sup> At its core, systems theory involves the transdisciplinary examination of systems—from electronic to social to biological—and how they respond to feedback from their environments in an attempt to steer behavior and self-regulate in a world shaped by chaos. Its fundamentals can be exemplified by Isaacs's Matrix: both grid and user are active agents in a system, and after gauging feedback from the surrounding space, the matrix can be modified to cater to a specific purpose.

Upon his return to Cranbrook as a faculty member, Isaacs combined elements of systems theory with his interest in total environments to develop the Matrix Study Course—an experimental learning program intended to teach students how to position themselves and their ideas in a complex, interconnected world. As he later recalled, “[t]he old-fashioned student was a hitch-hiker by virtue of being in touch only with sieved, edited opinion of the lecturer, author, or film director. Why suffer the boredom, indirection and complexity of being perpetually at three or four removes from the data?”<sup>18</sup> As a proposed solution, Isaacs extrapolated his *pholage* idea to create the Matrix Drum (fig. 7), a circular learning chamber eighteen feet in diameter, into which color images from three slide projectors affixed along the periphery were cast onto the interior walls, accompanied by audio. The subjects inside were immersed in a 360-degree brume of multisensory stimulation, realizing, Isaacs hoped, that “any situation is made of components, but only when these components are taken collectively, can the true characteristic of the activity be described.”<sup>19</sup> A cybernetic practice, the subjects created meaningful avenues and patterns in a constructed environment of randomness. Isaacs continued this thread by establishing a design process he called “translations” to help students visualize information about themselves and the broader community. Students would first design a biographical representation, followed by one of a fellow classmate, and finally of the greater domain in which they lived, revealing their role as elements in the expanded system of humanity. The exercise paralleled Isaacs's

17 Cybernetician Norbert Wiener's 1954 text, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society*, was particularly influential for Isaacs. As an assignment, his students were required to interpret any part of the book as a designed object. James S. Ward, “Matrix at Cranbrook: An Experimental Design Course Shakes Student Preconceptions,” *Industrial Design* 5, no. 3 (March 1958): 75.

18 Isaacs, “Alpha Chambers,” 43.

19 Ken Isaacs, quoted in Ward, “Matrix at Cranbrook,” 73.



**FIG. 6.** ISAACS, SEEMINGLY DANCING THE WATUSI, ENTERTAINS HIS WIFE BARBARA AND PARTY GUESTS. THIS PHOTOGRAPH WAS ONE OF SEVERAL HUNDRED SHOT BY REID MILES FOR A 1968 *LOOK* MAGAZINE FEATURE, FOUR OF WHICH WERE ULTIMATELY SELECTED FOR PUBLICATION. IMAGE FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS.



**FIG. 8.** THE KNOWLEDGE BOX, CIRCA 1962. PHOTO COURTESY IIT ARCHIVES, PAUL V. GALVIN LIBRARY, ILLINOIS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY (CHICAGO).



**FIG. 7.** THE MATRIX DRUM. PHOTO COURTESY KEN ISAACS.



**FIG. 9:** ISAACS ASSEMBLING A MICROHOUSE ON THE GROVELAND PROPERTY. PHOTO COURTESY KEN ISAACS.

ultimate goal with the Matrix investigation: to find product solutions addressing problems of the total environment, rather than the much more subjective (and entrenched) impulse to design simply for one's own stylistic preference.<sup>20</sup>

While transformative for his students, Isaacs's disinterest in teaching a more conventional, commercially viable product design curriculum made waves with Academy director Zoltan Sepeshy, and Isaacs departed in early 1958. After devoting some time to his design practice in New York, in 1961 Isaacs was invited to be a visiting professor at the Illinois Institute of Technology, where he refined and consummated his educational Information Structure concept with the Knowledge Box (fig. 8).<sup>21</sup> A twelve-foot square cube of wood, Masonite, and steel fabrication, it featured twenty-four slide projectors evenly spaced in portals along its six walls, transmitting a rapid progression of images while a participant holding the audio-supplying wireless receiver stood inside. Various photographic programs were employed—current events from the pages of *Life*, or photo-inventories of cultural diversity—to create a “totally new, totally strange, even seemingly hostile environment”<sup>22</sup> for transmitting narratives and generating ideas in a nonlinear format. Subjects in the Knowledge Box were “agents of synthesis,” learning through praxis rather than passive digestion.

The Knowledge Box garnered widespread national attention, landing Isaacs on the cover of *Life* in September of 1962. Reporters described being jarred by the “visual turmoil” and haunted by the images afterward, one positing that to some it may “appear to have been lifted intact from among the devilish equipment of a Red-world dungeon devoted to the insidious science of brain-washing.”<sup>23</sup> Cold War anxiety certainly contributed, but the significance of the Knowledge Box stood principally at the intersection of communication theory's increasing prevalence and the onslaught of globalized multimedia that gripped the cultural zeitgeist. Charles and Ray Eames's multiscreen *Glimpses of the USA*, exhibited inside a Buckminster Fuller geodesic dome at the 1959 Moscow World's Fair, operated similarly to Isaacs's Information Structures, projecting seven films simultaneously with an accompanying soundtrack to enhance awareness through heightened sensation.<sup>24</sup> Experimental filmmakers in the 1960s similarly adopted the multisensory

20 Ward, “Matrix at Cranbrook,” 76.

21 The “Knowledge Box” moniker was bestowed by Clay Gowran, a journalist for the *Chicago Sunday Tribune*. Isaacs originally named this structure the Alpha Chamber, as this was the first of many he planned to build. Isaacs, “Alpha Chambers,” 42.

22 Clay Gowran, “The Incredible Knowledge Box,” *Chicago Sunday Tribune Magazine*, July 29, 1962, 9.

23 *Ibid.*, 8.

24 The Eameses were particularly informed by the communications theories of Claude Shannon. See Beatriz Colomina, “Enclosed by Images: The Eameses' Multimedia Architecture,” *Grey Room*, no. 2 (Winter 2001): 6-29.

approach, often designing specific processing environments to encapsulate their “expanded cinema” works. In 1964, Stan VanDerBeek constructed a Fuller-esque dome equipped with projectors to house his “Movie-Drome,” a “total Envelope Environment” for an immersive cinema experience, which was inspired by a visit to Isaacs’s Knowledge Box.<sup>25</sup> It was the dawn of the age of new media, and designers, artists, scholars, and advertisers alike were enraptured by its possibilities.

## OPEN DESIGN

With the rise of the countercultural movement, Isaacs’s experimental furniture and dwellings began to align with the youthful gestalt of the 1960s and 1970s. Alternative principles of lifestyle—from homesteading to nomadism—were central to the hippie dogma, and Isaacs, a lifelong environmentalist, grew increasingly concerned with the ramifications of a mechanized, globalizing society. His Matrix idea became even more critical for ethical and ecological reasons, and he redirected his practice to consider the ways in which he and others could live flexibly and sustainably.

Since the early 1950s Isaacs had been workshopping designs for a Microhouse—a matrix-based architectural pod assembled from prefabricated parts that could be built and broken down at whim (fig. 9). He had purchased a stretch of timber acreage in Groveland, Illinois, around that time, and in 1962 an Architectural Fellowship from the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts allowed Isaacs to erect three Microhouses on the property. For the next decade, Isaacs spent long periods in the commune-like setting of former students (he left IIT in 1963) and friends at Groveland, commuting back to New York for stretches of time to maintain his design practice.

Perhaps due in part to the greater room for experimentation the country life provided, Isaacs began to refine his furniture forms in the mid-sixties. One such example is the Superchair, which was originally conceived for an American Cotton Association design competition in 1955, and then formalized for production in 1967. The 4 x 4 cubic frame housed storage, an adjustable book stand, a movable marble table surface, an overhead light, space for a miniature television, and a seating area that could unfold into a bed. Described by Isaacs in *Popular Science*

25 Stan VanDerBeek, as quoted in Alastair Gordon, *Spaced Out: Radical Environments of the Psychedelic Sixties* (New York: Rizzoli, 2008), Kindle edition, loc. 470. In a later article for the *Wall Street Journal*, Gordon additionally presents psychologist Timothy Leary and artists Richard Aldroft and Allen Atwell as individuals who created their own psychedelic environments informed by Isaacs’s Knowledge Box. Alastair Gordon, “Wall to Wall: Futures Past: Knowledge Box Reborn,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 13, 2009, <http://blogs.wsj.com/magazine/2009/10/13/wall-to-wall-futures-past-knowledge-box-reborn/>.

as “the laziest easy chair you’ve ever lounged in,” he suggested “park[ing] it in an untraveled corner and (if you have a properly trained wife who’ll deliver your lunch) you can settle in for the day. Everything you need is within reach.”<sup>26</sup> The Superchair would eventually become the first subject in a series of build-it-yourself design articles Isaacs published in *Popular Science* from 1968 to 1972 while he served as the magazine’s contributing editor for design. From the drop-leaf I-Table and Cube Chairs, which were stackable with cubbies for storage, to the open-matrix Fun House, a knock-down, pipe-and-lumber, adult jungle gym/camp site, Isaacs publicized many designs that were available for purchase at his New York design studio, and he also provided instructions on how to make them at a fraction of the cost. Always a firm believer in the transformative act of building, Isaacs’s populist approach to design allowed his structures and his *process* to reach thousands more households than his Manhattan storefront.

Accordingly, the four-year period in which Isaacs wrote for *Popular Science* also marked the publication run of Stewart Brand’s *Whole Earth Catalog*, an open-source product guide brimming with multifarious “tools” for engendering an environmentally conscious, self-sufficient, and enlightened lifestyle. Around this time, systems theory—essentially the linchpin for Isaacs’s Information Structures—had gripped many of the influential minds behind the countercultural movement, who believed in a human ecology that needed to constantly self-educate and regulate to live harmoniously with nature.<sup>27</sup> Back-to-the-land hippie communes favored pop-up living environments for their ability to be reconfigured and adapted regularly, what architectural historian Simon Sadler deems “a continual state of becoming.”<sup>28</sup> Ostensibly, time had finally caught up with the Isaacs way of mind.

Riding on the success of the *Whole Earth Catalog*, by the 1970s do-it-yourself manuals became the ideal avenue for distributing and promoting the trappings of alternative living. Isaacs published his own DIY manual in 1974, aptly titled *How to Build Your Own Living Structures*. In a wry and easygoing 1970s parlance, he presented a compendium of the designs that defined the past two decades of his career, along with detailed instructions, drawings, materials lists, and the occasional off-the-cuff anecdote. Half practical guide, half diary, Isaacs affably appealed to the individualism of the reader with universal building concepts. In the enduring spirit of open design, the text is now widely available as a free download from the Internet.

26 Ken Isaacs, “Build the Superchair,” *Popular Science*, March 1968, 161.

27 Buckminster Fuller, Norbert Wiener, and Marshall McLuhan were three of the most influential idols of intellect for this faction of individuals.

28 Simon Sadler, “An Architecture of the Whole,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 61, no. 4 (May 2008), 113.

Isaacs accepted a full-time teaching position in the Architecture Department at the University of Illinois in 1970 and continued to design concurrently until his retirement in 2000. Although his staunch, anti-consumerism convictions precluded the level of commercial recognition reached by some of his contemporaries, Isaacs's truly visionary approach is identifiable in the design communities of past and present. In the 1960s and 1970s, unitary, all-inclusive living environments stole the spotlight at international product and museum exhibitions. In 1963, nearly ten years after the Cranbrook Living Structure, Verner Panton created a *Multi-Level Lounger*, with elevated foam upholstered platforms applied interstitially to a tubular steel grid. Joe Colombo's 1971 *Total Furnishing Unit* combined every aspect of a home—from kitchen to closet to bedroom—into one space-age, plastic capsule. In 1974, Italian designer Enzo Mari channeled his communist ideologies into *Autoprogettazione* ("self-projects"), a suite of furniture designs released as an instruction manual, all of which could be fabricated using just lumber and nails. An early piece with attractive provenance sold for \$14,400 at Sotheby's in 2006. Andrea Zittel's 1992 *A-Z Management and Maintenance Unit Model 003*, along with her other "living units," draws direct formal and material qualities from Isaacs's Living Structures, but presents them as interactive sculpture works, customized by their collectors. And the Tiny House movement that emerged out of the Great Recession resurrected the prefabricated, environmentally friendly, modular home. In 2010, Glasgow design student Alec Farmer reconstructed Isaacs's Microhouse using *How to Build Your Own Living Structures* as a guide, and in an investigation of urban nomadism he lived on the streets of Glasgow for several months.

Aside from Farmer's Microhouse, it is unclear whether these artists and designers were looking explicitly to Isaacs's work as a source of inspiration, but ultimately that consideration misses the point. Isaacs was a progressive, subversive, renegade of his field, fundamentally rethinking and redefining conventions of living and learning through designed objects. With his Matrix System, Isaacs paved the way for others to examine and challenge their own interactions with space, imagery, environment, materials, and modes of making, transforming the way designers and individuals would envision and experience the material world for decades to come.

SHELLEY SELIM

JEANNE AND RALPH GRAHAM COLLECTIONS FELLOW

CRANBROOK ART MUSEUM

# EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

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## **Living Structure**

Designed by Ken Isaacs, 1954  
Reconstructed by Reed Wilson, 2014  
Wood, plywood, upholstered foam, and found images  
Commissioned by Cranbrook Art Museum

## **Superchair**

Designed by Ken Isaacs, 1955  
Produced by Ken Isaacs Ltd., 1967  
Published in *Popular Science*, 1968  
Reconstructed by Reed Wilson, 2014  
Wood, plywood, upholstered foam, and Plexiglas  
Commissioned by Cranbrook Art Museum

## **Meditator**

Designed by Ken Isaacs, 1962  
Published in *Popular Science*, 1970  
Reconstructed by Reed Wilson, 2014  
Wood, plywood, and found images  
Commissioned by Cranbrook Art Museum

## **Knowledge Box 2 Model**

Designed by Ken Isaacs, 1962  
Constructed by Alex Derdelakos and Chris Strailman, 2009  
Illinois Institute of Technology College of Architecture  
Wood and paperboard  
Courtesy of IIT Archives, Paul V. Galvin Library, Illinois Institute of Technology (Chicago)  
IIT Archives Series 2009.023/01

## **The Knowledge Box**

Directed by Barbara Isaacs  
1963  
16mm film transferred to DVD (14:35 minutes)  
Courtesy of Barbara Isaacs

## **"Ideas for Home Use Can Sprout in Galleries"**

*Birmingham Eccentric*  
August 23, 1953  
Courtesy of Cranbrook Archives, Cranbrook Center for Collections and Research  
Cranbrook Foundation Public Relations Office  
Scrapbook, December 1952 to December 1953

## **Cranbrook Academy of Art Course Announcement 1957-1958**

Courtesy of Cranbrook Archives, Cranbrook Center for Collections and Research  
Cranbrook Academy of Art Publications

## **Industrial Design Magazine**

March 1958  
Courtesy of Cranbrook Academy of Art Library

## **Chicago Tribune Magazine**

July 29, 1962  
Courtesy of IIT Archives, Paul V. Galvin Library, Illinois Institute of Technology (Chicago)  
IIT Archives 1998.031

## **Life Magazine**

September 14, 1962  
Courtesy of Cranbrook Archives, Cranbrook Center for Collections and Research

## **Popular Science Magazine**

November 1969  
Courtesy of Cranbrook Archives, Cranbrook Center for Collections and Research

## **Amerika Magazine**

December 1969  
Courtesy of Barbara Isaacs

## **Popular Science Magazine**

April 1970  
Courtesy of Cranbrook Archives, Cranbrook Center for Collections and Research

## **Popular Science Magazine**

November 1970  
Courtesy of Cranbrook Archives, Cranbrook Center for Collections and Research

## **Culture Breakers, Alternatives, and Other Numbers**

Ken Isaacs  
1970  
MSS Educational Publishing  
Courtesy of Ken and Sara Isaacs

## **How to Build Your Own Living Structures**

Ken Isaacs  
1974  
Harmony Books, a Division of Crown Publishers  
Courtesy of Cranbrook Academy of Art Library

# CREDITS AND SPONSORS

*Culture Breakers: The Living Structures of Ken Isaacs* was published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same title presented at Cranbrook Art Museum June 21 through October 5, 2014. The exhibition was organized by Cranbrook Art Museum.



Cranbrook Art Museum

Museum Director: Gregory Wittkopp  
Exhibition Curator: Shelley Selim  
Exhibition Registrars: Roberta Frey Gilboe and Gretchen Sawatzki  
Exhibition Preparators: Mark Baker and Reed Wilson  
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