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Design

Reframing Farnsworth

Author Nora Wendl on Desire, Architecture and Rewriting Modernist History

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Edith Farnsworth and Beth Dunlap/Photo: William Dunlap, c. 1951.

What happens when the patron of one of the most iconic houses in modern architecture steps out from the margins of history and into the frame? In "Almost Nothing: Reclaiming Edith Farnsworth," writer, artist and educator Nora Wendl shifts the spotlight from Mies van der Rohe to Dr. Edith Farnsworth—the woman who commissioned, lived in, and ultimately fought for the glass house that bears her name. Blending archival research, personal memoir and poetic reflection, Wendl constructs a new architectural narrative—one grounded in desire, authorship and the politics of erasure. From late-night writing sessions in Chicago to buried archives and hard-won court transcripts, "Almost Nothing" is a reckoning with the past—and a reframing of who gets to shape it.

"Almost Nothing" rewrites the story of one of the most iconic homes in modernist architecture—but from the perspective of its patron, not its architect. What drew you to Edith Farnsworth, and why was now the right time?

There are countless histories of the Edith Farnsworth House that focus on its architect, Mies van der Rohe—likely because this was his first completed house in the United States, so it was a pivotal moment in his career after his emigration from Germany in 1938. But I always wanted to hear directly from Dr. Edith Farnsworth, the woman who commissioned the house in 1951 and paid for its design and construction: who is this woman who desired her own glass house, one she would just live in on the weekends? It fascinated me.

It's remarkable how rarely writers and historians turn their attention to the person who desired the architecture in the first place—not just their biography, but what they wanted in life. I like to argue that desire is the origin of architecture. Dr. Alice T. Friedman, who has become a good friend, first wrote about Edith Farnsworth's desire for this house in her book "Women and the Making of the Modern House," and I like to think I'm continuing some of her work in the parts that analyze the client's life and desires. I drew Edith's voice mostly from her memoirs, photographs and poems, which are all fragmented glimpses of her interior (and exterior) world. The research staff at the Newberry Library, where these items are kept, were incredibly generous with their time and support over the years that I visited—I benefited tremendously from their knowledge and generosity.

I didn't at first intend to write this book as a memoir, but I encountered so many obstacles in researching Edith that it just became one. I couldn't write about the trial transcripts from her lawsuit with the architect and not write about the difficulty I faced even finding this transcript, and then negotiating reading it because the only copy I could find was owned by someone who was a Mies enthusiast—I had to "prove" to him I was not going to slander the architect in my book in order to get permission to read the transcript, and my first encounter with it was just reading it in his apartment in a glass tower built by the architect. I was not even allowed to photograph it. The transcript is 4,000 pages long, so that was an impossible task in the two hours I was permitted—and the person who owned this transcript knew it. He did eventually allow me to send in a company to scan the transcript, but for months it looked bleak and I almost gave up. This book is full of such experiences—they needed to be written because they tell us why history doesn't change much over time.

You blend memoir, research and storytelling in a unique way. How did writing become a kind of architecture for you—a way to build something new out of what's been lost or left out?

I love this description of the writing as a "kind of architecture": I never considered that before, and it makes a lot of sense. I was very inspired by the work of Maggie Nelson, particularly "Bluets," which has a similar blend of memoir, research and storytelling. Nelson argues that the book she is writing is a "history of the color blue," but as you read it, it becomes clear that it's a memoir, and largely a love story with flashes and fragments of philosophy and research about the color blue. I was so drawn to this writing: she's one of my favorite authors, and one of the things I love most about her books is that you can sense her thinking through writing—she doesn't write something she's already "decided," but rather arrives at an understanding through writing. I thought I'd try a similar approach.

I wrote each chapter as a "constellation," weaving together memoir, research and storytelling as a way of grappling with the contemporary condition: everything vies for our attention. On our phones, we get constant news alerts about human atrocities, then we get an email or phone call from a colleague that jars us, we pause and Google a symptom—why this pain or that pain is happening, trying to diagnose ourselves; we escape with a glass of wine or text a lover—all of these things become a part of one's consciousness and attention, too. I think that history is made up of all of these everyday moments, and I wanted them to be in the book. If what Hayden White writes is true (borrowing from Michael Oakeshott) that the historical past is a construction, then in this book I suppose I'm offering another way of constructing. I hope that this book makes writing in the first person an inevitable thing that historians do, drawing attention to the fabricated-ness of history—borrowing from what Saidiya Hartman calls "critical fabulation." Of course, I'm not professionally trained as an historian, so I feel outside of the pressures of that discipline.

You've described becoming "lashed to a ghost" while researching Edith. What surprised you most during the process of searching for her—whether in archives, objects or your own memory?

One thing that surprised me when researching my "ghost," Edith, is that archivists and those who manage collections can make or break your research journey—especially if your subject lived long ago. Thanks to a generous archivist, Sue Sacharski at the Northwestern Medicine Archives, I found that not only were Edith's employment files on record there, since she was an attending physician at Northwestern, but also over one-hundred poems she'd written with the hopes of the collection being published. Her editor and friend, Jim Gerard, couldn't find a publisher for them, but entrusted them to Northwestern decades ago—and specifically sent them to Sue to archive. Remarkably, in this collection was a poem written specifically to an "M.G.P." which I believe is a reference to Mary G. "Polly" Porter, a woman Edith knew from her summers in Castine, Maine as a young woman, who may or may not have been a love interest of hers (one can glean so much from the poem itself, titled "J'accuse"). It gives a beautiful and rich context to her life that has never been considered before. Sue contacted me to tell me she had this collection of poems—I had no idea it was there! She reached out because she heard I was working on this book. I think too often we overlook the power that people who maintain historical archives have: they always know where the good stuff is. As a writer, I'm so aware of my debt to them, and am deeply appreciative of their work. Sue, for example, changed the whole trajectory of my book. I can't thank her enough.

You did much of this work in Chicago—researching in archives, walking through buildings, absorbing the city's history. How did Chicago itself shape your understanding of Edith, her house and perhaps even yourself?

Yes! I decided moving to Chicago would be a way to inhabit Edith's identity, though we were of course separated by her death and the decades between us—I was born eighty years after she was. Chicago has such a rich history, some of which is visible—you can trace the partial history of the skyscraper in downtown Chicago, and I was able to visit and spend time in Mies' Lake Shore Drive apartments—and some of which is over-written and rendered illegible, such as Bronzeville, a thriving center of Black culture and commerce that was destroyed in part by the campus expansion of IIT, which is also connected to the legacy of Mies van der Rohe, who designed that expansion.

What do you hope readers—or visitors to the Farnsworth House—will see differently after encountering Edith's story through you?

I hope readers will consider that what we call history is by its very nature a limited and flawed experiment in communicating the past. I hope that this book gives them the inspiration to look for what seems to be missing in the world in front of them, and to write or otherwise create an opening for that to be made visible.

Nora Wendl's "Almost Nothing: Reclaiming Edith Farnsworth" is available from University of Illinois Press.

DESIGN TOP 5

1. **Chicago Architecture Biennial.** Chicago Cultural Center and across the city. The Chicago Architecture Biennial brings global design to the city with bold installations, talks and events exploring how architecture meets today's biggest challenges. *Opens September 19*

2. **Eventually Everything Connects: Mid-Century Modern Design in the United States.** Cranbrook Art Museum. A major exhibition of 200 works highlighting Cranbrook's impact and the vital contributions of women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and designers of color to American modernism. *Through September 21*

3. **Wandawega: Bureau of Tourism.** 1429 West Grand. Camp Wandawega brings its rustic charm to Chicago with a cozy pop-up offering camp-inspired goods and a dose of lakeside nostalgia. *Check online for opening hours and available appointments.*

4. **Tiffany Lamps: Beyond the Shade.** Driehaus Museum. See Tiffany Studios like never before: Rare lighting in glass, bronze and enamel reveals the innovation, craftsmanship and untold stories behind the iconic designs. *Opens September 12*

5. **Community on the Make: Arts of Life 2000-2025.** Design Museum of Chicago. An anniversary exhibition highlighting Chicago's "studio collective where artists with intellectual and developmental disabilities lead with vision, passion and purpose." *Through September 30*