

House Beautiful



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THE SIXTY-FIRST FLOOR, PLEASE

Photographs by Richard Averill Smith

BY
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The view from the window of the drying and trimming room discloses a contemplative gargoyle ceaselessly watching over the city below

THROUGH traffic maze and city din — composite noise of clanging bells, grinding brakes, the swearing of truck drivers, newsboys' calls, honking horns, one voice talking to another — we thread our way to that breath-taking monument on the corner of Lexington Avenue and Forty-second Street, the Chrysler Building, whose tall spire loses itself in soft enfolding cloud or flashes the sunlight to a restless city, a beacon of the physical heights of human achievement. Through imposing doorway, high, shining black, and with metal brilliantly arrayed, we pass into a foyer sleek with pink marble and the restrained and lovely glow of concealed lighting, to pause a moment before avenues of elevators: '1-12,' '25-44,' '44-57.' A little to our left is '61-65,' and there we enter a cubicle the walls of which are an intricate inlay of contrasting woods in the modern manner of design.

'The sixty-first floor, please.' A button is pressed, the door silently closed, and with effortless ease we rise. Once or twice I swallow hard to rid myself of a slight pressure on the eardrums. There is no way of knowing,

but I think we must be going very fast. The glass numerals above the door begin to flash — fifty-seven, fifty-eight, fifty-nine, sixty — as fast as we can say them. Sixty-one — and the door opens. We have slid into place like the passing of the hand over a piece of soft velvet. We step into a bright corridor — bright with daylight. At our left a glass door with 'Margaret Bourke-White' in plain gold letters apprises us of our destination.

It has always seemed to me only consistent and right that so modern a structure as the penthouse should be furnished in the spirit of the twentieth century. Once before in these very pages, in November 1930, to be exact, I said something to that same effect. Though this is not a penthouse in the strict architectural sense, I have taken you to a dwelling on unparalleled heights possible only in this second quarter of the twentieth century. Imagine if you can, then, the dénouement, the anticlimax, the utter collapse of quickening excitement and anticipation if we had opened that door and found — Early American pine and maple! With all respect to those many efficient busi-



One of the most decorative features of the room is an aquarium placed over a small bar. This aquarium, with frame of stainless steel, has a piece of deep sea-green crystal flanked with solid glass cylinders and green and blue prismatic pebbles. At night this is effectively illuminated

The radio cabinet of maple, walnut, and metal, a beautiful piece of cabinetwork, houses also a victrola. The stairs lead out to a terrace which surrounds the tower at this floor

ness men who see no inconsistency between the sturdy, splendid furniture of a pioneer's humble home and the four walls of a modern skyscraper, if such incongruity had been found here, this story never would have been written.

To describe adequately this Olympic dwelling, small though it is, is to preface the description with a word about its owner, since personality is considerably involved in any right furnishing. It belongs to a young woman still in her twenties, adventure-loving, with vivid enthusiasms and extraordinarily successful in her own peculiar work — industrial photography. The principal room is a living-room, used also, when necessary, as a business reception room; hence, though it must be personal, it cannot be intimate. From the main hall of the building it is reached through its own private foyer, which is often used as a waiting-room, and adjoins a small office and such other rooms as are necessary for the efficient pursuit of modern photography.

John Vassos, well known as an illustrator, planned the



room as a whole and designed its furniture. Though he has not entirely forsaken illustration, he has become increasingly interested in designing the modern interior, and it is interesting to note, as one examines the room, that his design has an imaginative quality, a richness achieved through texture and design, — and color, too, when one can see it actually, — that is often absent from our modern scheme when its designer lacks the background of actual art experience. This is modern functional furniture, of course, but mere functional designing can be both dull and uninteresting. Even in a mass-production age it must be coupled with personality to transcend its practical everyday qualities. The more severely functional it becomes, the more does it need the enlivening touch of the artist.

Note then the play of light and shade so quickly apparent in the combination of woods used for the cabinetwork, tawny walnut panels and a golden strip of maple; a contrast noted also in the high gloss of the woods versus the soft and light-absorbing mottled brown of the cork used as a background for the desk, for the triangular benches of the minute bar, and as baseboards, in the soft suède-like quality of the chamois velours used for certain

of the chair coverings, and again in the cold dust-resisting fabrikoid surface of desk chair and couches as revealed against the warm depth of the carpet. Such decorative play does not happen; it is a carefully thought out circumstance.

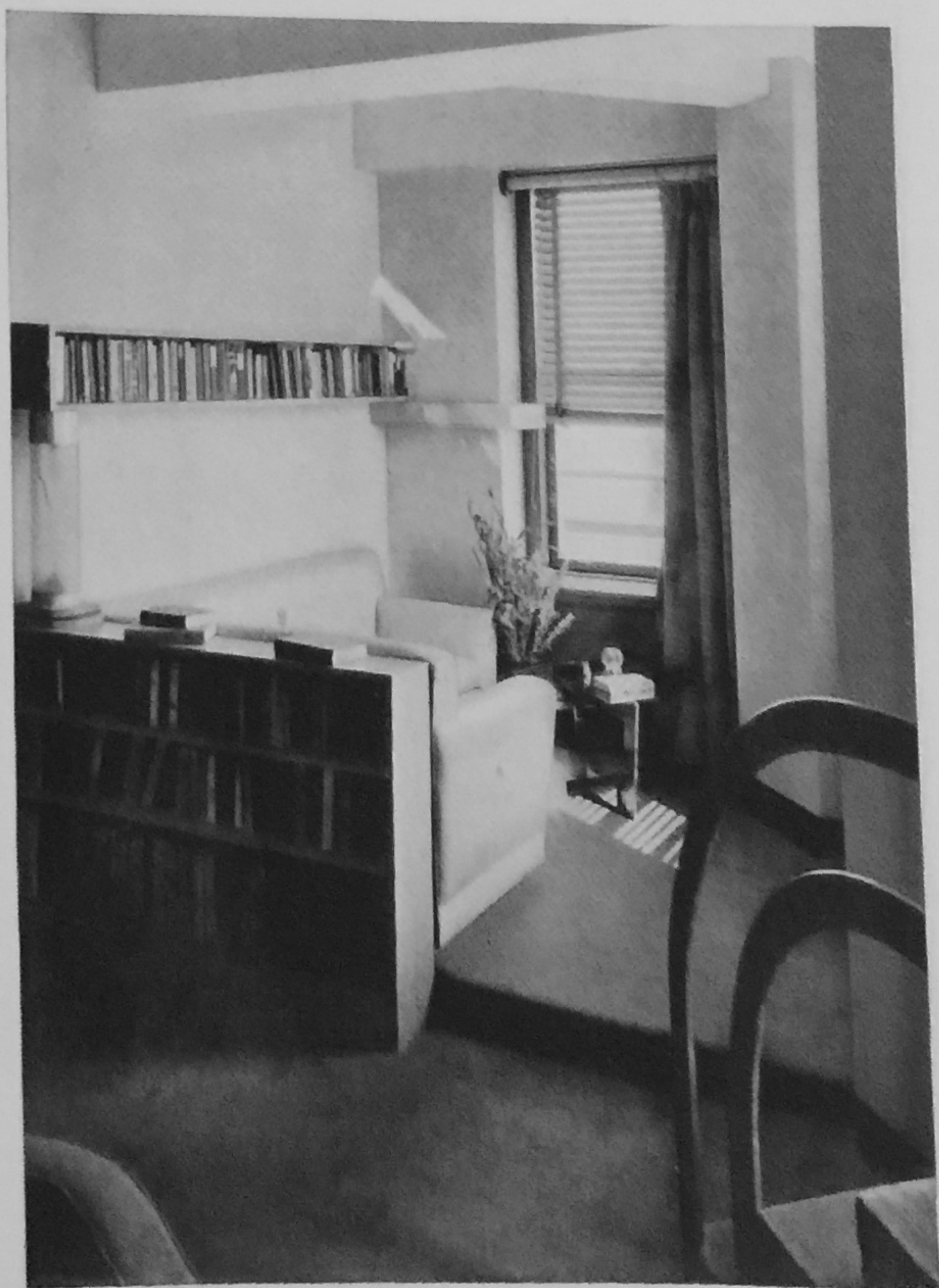
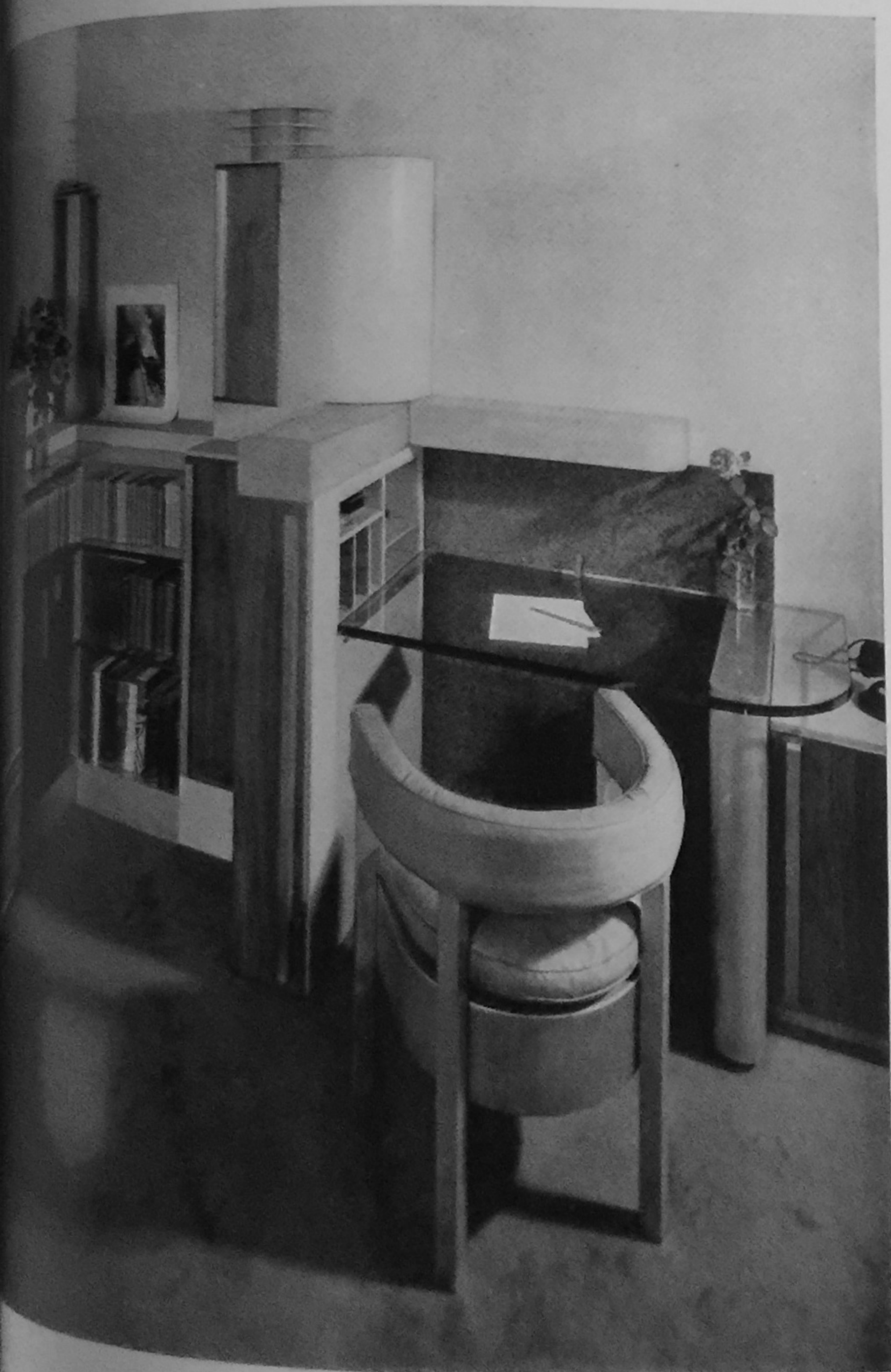
The color scheme is unusual. To offset the architectural severity of the cream walls and ceiling, a raspberry-colored carpet has been used. Striking color contrast is afforded by the metallic sheen of the stainless-steel stair railing and the aluminum desk chair with its upholstery of apple-green fabrikoid. Used as an accent, this arresting note of green appears again only on the little wooden stool underneath one of the windows. The window draperies are hung by huge metal rings on large aluminum poles sunk in black pockets. The curtaining of the room, though green, offers no sharp contrast to the carpet, since it is subdued by interweaving threads of golden tan and brown, the predominant colors found in most of the furniture of the room. Venetian blinds of corrugated aluminum control the sunlight, which can be intensely bright up here above the shadowy chasms of the streets below. Besides being decorative and useful, they are very light and easy to work.

The shape of the room is quite irregular, following as it does the exterior lines of the tower of the building. This

proves a decided decorative asset, providing interesting planes of light and shade and permitting delightful groupings of furniture. For instance, at the left of the entrance to the room is the conversational unit slightly raised on a dais. Comfortable couches covered with a light tan fabrikoid and complemented by a metal table with a top of black mirror glass make this an ideal spot in which to relax. Here Miss Bourke-White has her breakfast tray. Outside the window on a small section of the balcony two of her pets, a box turtle and a terrapin, consume their daily head of lettuce in silent companionship with a contemplative gargoyle. Their owner, I understand, is a graduate in herpetology, which according to my dictionary means 'the study of the structure, habits and classification of reptiles.' (Continued on page 308)

A heavy slab of plate glass, a cork back, a small cabinet, and an oblong light box combine to make a convenient desk. The chair of aluminum has apple-green fabrikoid upholstery

At the left as one enters the office is this conversation alcove with couch in tan fabrikoid and metal table with black mirror top. The hangings are of a green rep-like material with interwoven threads of golden tan and brown, the walls cream, the carpet raspberry color, and the Venetian blinds corrugated aluminum. John Vassos designed the furniture



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Beyond the little stair which leads to a wide balcony surrounding the whole tower, and which counts as movable furniture, since it is a part of Mr. Vassos's scheme for the room, is a highly interesting group consisting of a small bar, aquarium, and victrola-radio. Here you can easily discern the practical

value of the cork backing which serves to protect the wall and absorb the sound of bumping stools. A glimpse of the cork baseboard is also shown in this picture. The aquarium, with its frame of stainless steel, is of immense decorative interest. The bottom is lined with glass pebbles in blues and

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greens, and a huge piece of deep sea-green crystal is flanked by glass cylinders of varying heights. At night electric bulbs beneath the bottom illuminate the tank with prismatic brilliance.

Some day perhaps we shall be able to buy radio cabinets like this one without having them made to order. This particular one, in addition to the interest of its design, is a piece of cabinetwork so fine that it is a joy to possess. Lift the top, and there is the victrola. Slide back the little door, and there are the radio dials. The loud speaker is cleverly concealed behind the metal grille in the base. Certainly there is no anachronism here! On the top, by the way, is one of Miss Bourke-White's own pictures of a Russian industrial plant.

Designers of modern furniture enjoy particularly the problems presented by the desk, whose ramifications suggest many solutions waiting to be evolved by functional experts. This particular desk is simple and the more successful for that reason. Its arresting feature is the heavy plate-glass writing slab, again with the pleasant-textured, practical cork backing. On the right a telephone cabinet conceals the books within. On the left are only those pigeon-holes necessary for a little note paper, since there is an office in connection with this apartment which assumes the burden of all detail. Note the long slender cabinet to hold maps, portfolios, and large flat material. Heavy plate glass is also used for the

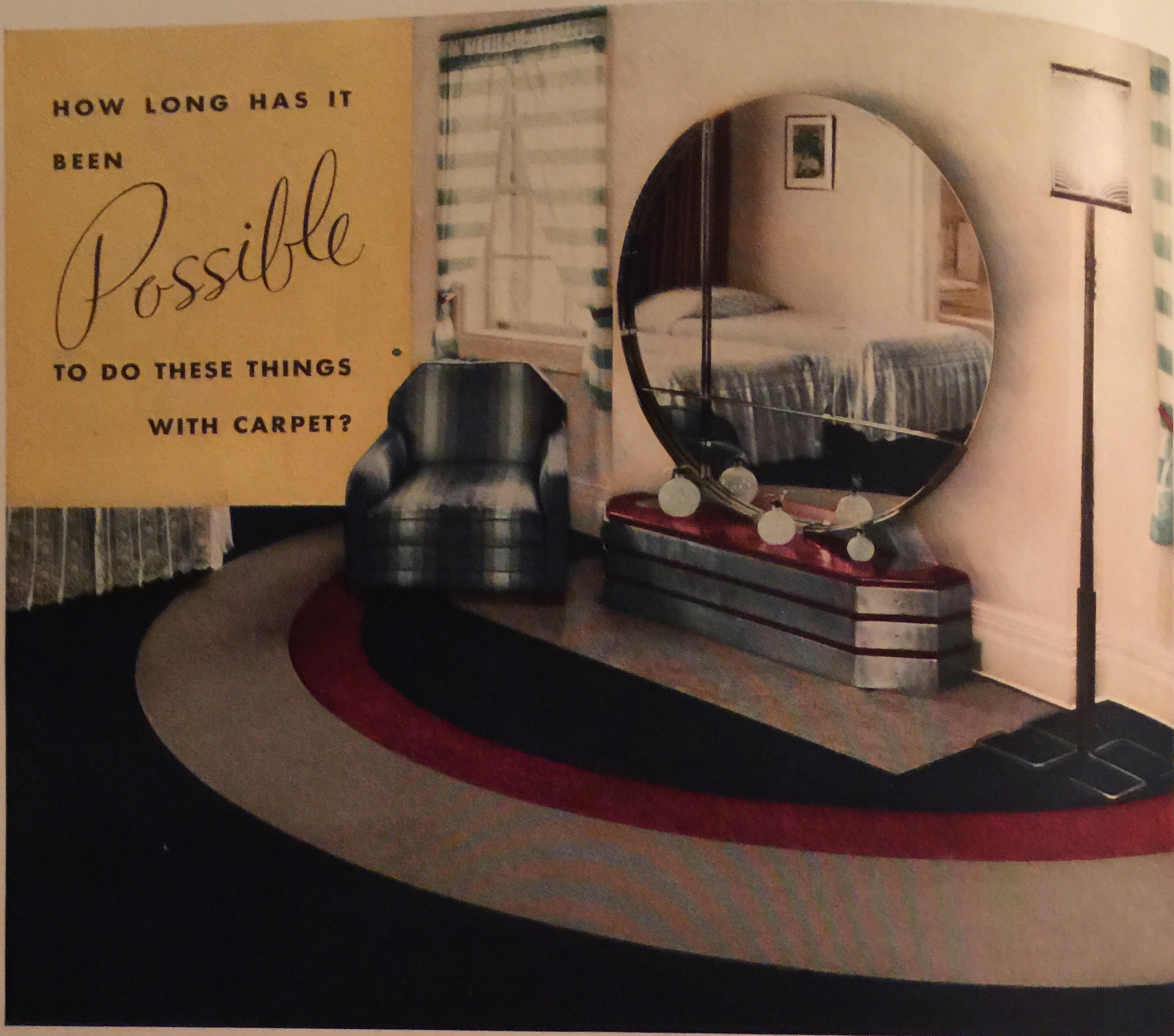
shelves in the adjoining book recess. Elsewhere in the room bookshelves are of maple. The various walnut-paneled enclosures conceal papers and supplies. A large one on the left of this group, and just caught by the camera, holds flat trays for mounted photographs. In some cases the smaller ones conceal the inner workings of the lighting. All have the same long squared handles of stainless steel.

And with the lighting I conclude my story. Concealed lighting behind frosted glass is of course used. That we take for granted as a modern characteristic. But notice that there are no movable lamps; that all lighting is incorporated in the design of the whole room; that wherever you wish to read or write there is adequate and comfortable light. Notice also that with the exception of the desk lighting all lights are placed approximately four feet high, 'exactly,' as Mr. Vassos told me, 'like the horizon of the sky when a man is walking.' But there is still another horizon. Just before we leave we take one more look out of the windows. It is a fascinating and ever-changing panorama, defying description; brilliant and stimulating in the sunshine of a blue sky, gray and obscure through the low-hanging smoke of a listless, humid day, or completely obliterated as soft white vapor shuts out the world below, leaving one isolated and alone, a dweller on Mount Olympus, sixty-one stories high.

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This color photograph was taken in a home in Forest Hills, Long Island. The Collins & Aikman Carpet, in Tuscan red, marine blue and gray, was furnished and laid by R. H. Macy & Co., New York.

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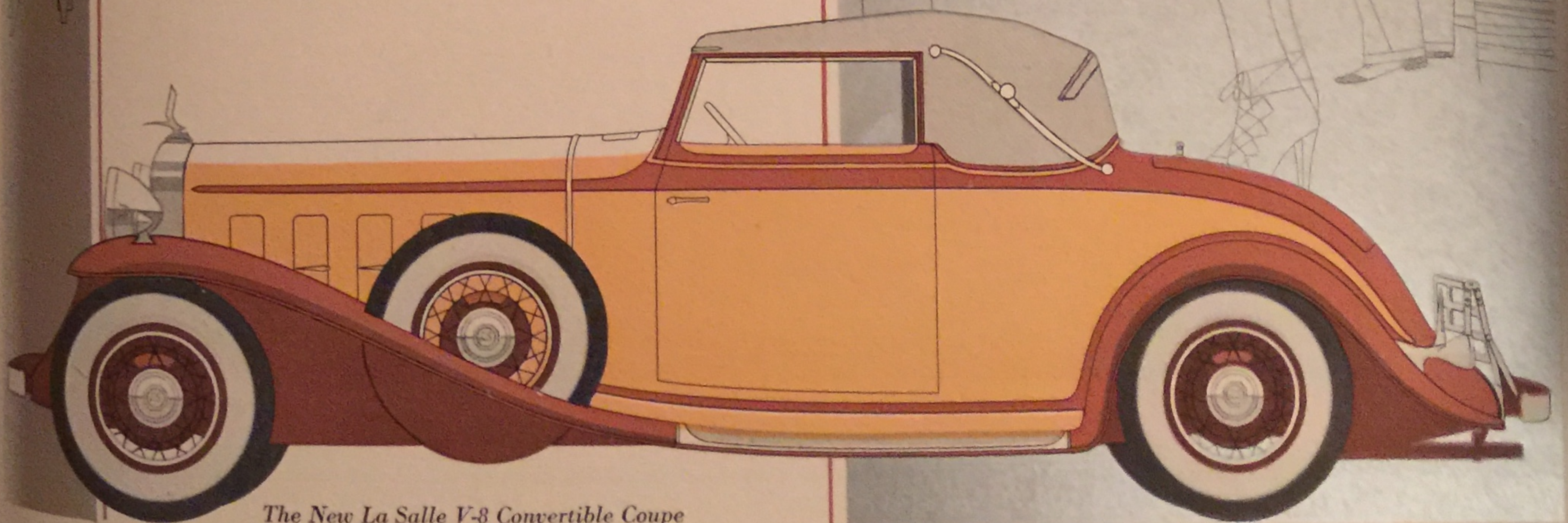
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