



Smithsonian American Art Museum

Towards a Research Practice: Frederick Kiesler's Experiments in Morphology and Modern Design

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Austrian-American architect Frederick Kiesler (1890–1965) was an avant-garde theorist, designer, and educator who radically transformed disciplinary relationships between art, architecture, theater, philosophy, and science during the mid-twentieth century. Kiesler was an enigmatic and multi-faceted character who elaborated a unique and complex synthetic design practice through a wide-variety of furniture, stage, film, sculpture, exhibition, building, drawing, and writing projects. Although he constructed very few buildings in his lifetime, he developed an innovative model for experimental design research that has since proven inspirational for generations to follow.

Through his diverse and alternative approach to design research and its education, Kiesler derived a “second ‘modern’ order” that opposed normative panel and frame rectilinear glass and steel construction in favor of advanced technologies that might achieve continuous and more naturalized organic building structures. Kiesler invented new ways to modulate the built environment in response to multiple spatial habits of a perceiving body in motion situated and evolving through time. His architectural projects were designed to be “elastic”—mobile and flexible—able to expand and contract to perform multiple dwelling tasks. Kiesler became one of a small number of counter-figures during the twentieth century whose innovative experimental research developed themes and strategies fundamentally different from the major protagonists and building practices of modern design.

Although marginalized in his lifetime, Kiesler's work and methodologies have since become extremely relevant to the developing interests of the most recent generation of speculative artists and contemporary architects. Kiesler's unconventional lines of experimentation established an alternative trajectory for architects to develop interests and ideas in the arts and sciences outside the limits of normative building practices. My research and writing project on Kiesler, as initiated in my dissertation at Princeton University School of Architecture, presents a detailed and synthetic analysis of Kiesler's formative approach to architecture design. My plan while in residence at the Smithsonian is to study, document, and develop my writing for the first major scholarly monograph on Kiesler's architecture research practice.