

BOOK REVIEW

Unplanned Visitors: Queering the Ethics and Aesthetics of Domestic Space

Olivier Vallerand. Montreal, Quebec, and Kingston, Ontario: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020 (ISBN: 978-0-2280-0185-0)

Rosanne Kennedy

New York University, New York, United States Email: rtk1@nyu.edu

Queer theory and architectural practice might initially seem to be an odd pairing. But Olivier Vallerand makes a compelling case to bring the two fields together in *Unplanned Visitors: Queering the Ethics and Aesthetics of Domestic Space*. As the subtitle indicates, what Vallerand is particularly interested in is domestic spaces (houses, apartments, interiors, and senior centers). In moving beyond queer public spaces (bars, parks, bookstores, and movie houses) that are already construed and documented as queer spaces, *Unplanned Visitors* poses numerous questions and flights of research. What, for example, makes a domestic space queer? How does queer domestic space differ from heteronormative or homonormative domestic space? How has queer theory affected how we understand our built environment? And most important, how can we queer architectural practices?

In the introductory and first chapter, Vallerand provides a working framework for how he understands feminist and queer critiques of space. He then spends the rest of the book exploring what I would term “test” cases or critical readings of multiple projects that either explicitly or implicitly stage an encounter between queer theory and architecture (often but not always focused on domestic or intimate spaces). As Vallerand is quick to admit, the majority of his examples are theoretical projects, art exhibits, installations, and activist projects rather than built projects. This choice makes sense since artistic and activist interventions allow for a great deal more experimentation, play, and critique, whereas built projects’ cost and permanence encourages conservatism and conformity. As Vallerand argues, the very impermanence and uselessness of an exhibit or installation is its strength: “the ‘uselessness’ of installations creates unexpected discoveries that force the individual to stop, question, and reformulate their usual relation to architecture” (28).

Before delving into the specific projects discussed, let me say a few words about Vallerand’s understanding of “queer space theory.” In delineating queer space theory, Vallerand finds an “ally” in feminist critiques of separate-spheres ideology. The feminist critique and deconstruction of binary oppositions such as private/public, woman/man, feminine/masculine “opened up a path,” Vallerand argues, for queer critiques of space (13). Dolores Hayden’s *The Grand Domestic Revolution* and Jane Addams’s Hull House are particularly relevant for Vallerand in that both engage and challenge existing spatial, sexual, and gendered relations. Vallerand fastens specifically onto the deconstruction of the private/public (the first chapter is indeed titled, “Public Privacy, Private Publicness:

Feminist and Queer Critiques of Space”). Although I appreciate Vallerand’s reference to feminist critiques, I wondered if at times the critique of the binary private/public (or more colloquially, that the “personal is political”) slides in his analysis as being synonymous with the invisible/visible. At crucial moments, Vallerand implies that by making what is private or hidden public, or more aptly, visible (often literally) is itself a queering of the domestic space. Certainly visibility/invisibility has particular resonance in the queer community as the metaphor of the closet attests (and of course the slogan “We’re Here, We’re Queer, Get Used to It!”). Visibility can, of course, be emancipatory, but it can also be oppressive. Michel Foucault’s well-known discussion of the Panopticon highlights how visibility, architecture, and power are often entwined (see Foucault 1995). But regardless of whether visibility is liberating, I wonder if critiques of separate-spheres ideology are productive in thinking about queer space.

What, though, is specific to queer domestic space? What does it look like? Feel like? How does it differ from heteronormative or homonormative domestic spaces? Vallerand gives a nuanced and lengthy answer that is both frustrating and productive in its vagueness. First, he rules out identitarian arguments that define queer space by the identities (self-named or ascribed) of the designers/architects of the space or of its inhabitants. Instead, Vallerand argues that queer space is “performative” and “[i]n this sense, space is queer not in itself, but in relation to something else, in relation to the changing people using or visiting a place; the queerness of a space is a layer of spatial experience amongst others” (22). Vallerand also eschews any formal definition of queer space: there are no design elements to include or design rules to follow. How a space is used, its inhabitants, and how it evolves over time all define a space and renders it queer or not. (Queer space is potentially everywhere or nowhere!—but I think this is the point.)

Chapter 2 opens with two influential case studies: “Queer Space” at the Storefront for Art in Architecture in New York (1994) and John Paul Ricco’s “disappeared” at the Randolph Street Gallery in Chicago (1996). Both these exhibits are important to Vallerand as early frameworks for thinking about queer space. “Queer Space,” a collaborative endeavor organized by Beatriz Colomina, Dennis Dollens, Cindi Patton, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Henry Urbach, and Mark Wigley, commemorated the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Stonewall uprising. Much of the work focused on uncovering and celebrating historically queer spaces. For the “disappeared” show, Ricco invited artists to investigate “minor” architecture (drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s notion of minor literature) or queer spaces such as “cruising grounds, sex clubs, eroticized domestic environments” (40). Both shows interestingly did not focus on building queer spaces (let alone queer domestic spaces), but instead were invested in documenting queer spaces that already existed, exist, or could possibly exist. (This is a good example of making the invisible visible but not necessarily challenging the private/public dichotomy. Indeed, most of the historical spaces were public spaces.)

Vallerand then trains his attention on two exhibits that focus specifically on domestic architecture: “House Rules,” curated by Mark Robbins and exhibited at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio (1994) and “The Un-Private House” at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1999) curated by Terence Riley. “House Rules” paired theorists with architects to collaborate on rethinking the suburban single-family home to address contemporary social and political concerns (gender, race, sexuality, class). This is one exhibit I wish he had lingered on a bit more. Vallerand cites extensively from the exhibition’s catalog, *Assemblage*, but I wanted more. For example, one of the projects by Michael Moon, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Benjamin

Gianni, and Scot Weir explicitly queers the suburban home, and I wanted to know what this looked like. We also learn that there was tension and an important exchange between bell hooks (who has thought a lot about domestic spaces, place, gender, race, and sexuality [see hooks 2008]) and architects Julie Eizenberg and Hank Koning, but are not given details.

A counterpoint to “House Rules” is “The Un-Private House” (1999–2000). Riley chose twenty-six houses (already built or designed to be built) as exemplifying the future of private homes. Unlike “House Rules,” the houses in “The Un-Private House” are not attempts to think through social or political issues but are focused on high-modernist precepts. One of the main ideas that runs through the exhibit is that the house needs to be rethought to accommodate changing familial relations. The two houses Vallerand discusses in detail were designed primarily for a childless, single professional or a gay (male) childless couple: Joel Sanders’s unbuilt “House for a Bachelor” (Minneapolis, 1998) and Michael Maltzan’s Hergott Shepard Residence (Beverly Hills, 1999) respectively. These houses don’t really queer the domestic as eschew it altogether. For example, the “House for a Bachelor” centers the home gym, surfaces are hard and sleek, transparent panels replace walls, and large glass windows open up to the outside. The Hergott Shepard residence has the most peculiar and extravagant features: a reduced kitchen (since the residents don’t like to cook and prefer to have their meals catered), a garage off the kitchen (so the catering trucks can park), large living areas for entertaining and to showcase their art collection, and of course, also a home gym. In an interview, cited by Vallerand, Riley unfathomably claims that privacy is much less a concern as we have become less sexually anxious and more open to a “technological” presence (52–54). The lack of concern for privacy is evidenced in transparency (bathrooms and bedrooms are almost all “open plan”) within the home and to the outside (large windows allow passersby to see inside the house). If “House Rules” was an attempt to construct more diverse arrangements—if only speculative—“The Un-Private House” (re)enshrines (star) architects and their rarefied clients as the arbiters of good taste (masculine modernism).

“The Un-Private House” rightly serves for Vallerand as the anti-example of “good” architecture in that (most of) the houses impose a normative modernist framework, in a top-down fashion, both in their aesthetic choices and in the directives of how to “use” the house. However, I was perplexed by Vallerand’s claim that the “un-private house” is already a reality: “the private house, like all domestic space, is already ‘un-private’ and constantly open to the public gaze” (63). I am not sure what the “public gaze” means here. I think this is again evidence of a slippage between the visible and the public or political. I was also hoping for a discussion between “privacy” and “private property” that “The Un-Private House” seemed to be begging for—especially given its unabashed entrenchment in individual wealth and capital. Let’s really make the house un-private, I thought! But this points to a deeper critique that can be leveled equally at the “House Rules” projects that is briefly alluded to by Vallerand: why not rethink the private, single-family home altogether? Does queering the domestic entail thinking beyond this model?

In chapters 3 and 4, Vallerand examines Mark Robbins’s exhibit “Households” and Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset’s work, respectively. Robbins’s “Households” (exhibited from 2002–04 in multiple art institutes and later published as a monograph) photographed full-length pictures of subjects alongside photographs of their interiors. Names of the participants, relationship status, length of their relationship, and place of residence are documented in the subsequent monograph. In photographing ordinary

people (mostly gay couples, with some heterosexual couples, a few families with children, one lesbian couple, and three gay men living together) next to their ordinary dwellings and possessions, Robbins illuminates the (ambiguous) relationship between people, buildings, and things. But is this relationship rendered too static by the photographic image?

In his most extended engagement and longest chapter, Vallerand discusses several works by artists Elmgreen and Dragset. The immersive spaces of fictional domesticity that the artists create attract Vallerand's sustained attention. Many of their installations invite viewers to enter the interior spaces and engage with the furniture, artwork, and detritus of everyday living. The artists even employ performance artists to play different roles (butlers or maids or even real-estate agents trying to sell the house) to interact with viewers/participants. Vallerand's particular interest in their work, I assume, is because it highlights domesticity and identity-making as an interaction between its inhabitants, guests (even the unwanted), objects, and the built environment.

The penultimate chapter (just before the conclusion) is the most compelling. The chapter opens with a discussion of two projects for queer seniors. As we have come to expect, Vallerand juxtaposes two quite different projects: the affluent, architect-driven BOOM project (planned but unfinished) and the subsidized Town Hall Apartments in Chicago (completed in 2014). Although Vallerand appreciates that both projects aim to create safe spaces for seniors from the LGBT+ community, he unsurprisingly is less impressed with BOOM, which again centers the architect over the inhabitants.

If the Town Hall project gives us some clues as to the possibility of the built environment sustaining nonnormative lives (even in the most basic way), Vallerand's final two studies open up possibilities even further. Vallerand finishes the book with an examination of MYCKET, a Swedish feminist and queer collective, and Andrés Jaque's Office for Political Innovation (OFFPOLINN). MYCKET, Vallerand notes, is the Swedish word for "much, a lot," and this is their guiding aesthetic: maximalist, excessive, and inclusive. Vallerand cites Sheila Levant (a feminist graphic designer), who claims a maximalist aesthetic as the alternative to the sleek and "clean elegance" of a modernist aesthetic: "I will never, never, never forget people of color, people of different points of view, people of different genders, people of different sexual preference. . . . It is not possible to plaster over everything with clean elegance. Dirty architecture, fuzzy theory, and dirty design." And importantly, she notes, "Feminist design is an effort to bring the values of the domestic sphere into the public sphere; feminist design is about letting diverse voices be heard through caring, relational strategies of working and designing" (143).

What is intriguing in this definition is the claim that the "values of the domestic sphere" should be brought into the public sphere. This is, in an important way, the inverse of the claims of some of the earlier examples (for example, "The Un-Private House"). Practices and (ideal) values of the domestic sphere (caring, relationality, imperfection) should be transposed to the public sphere rather than the other way around. A slightly different point would also distinguish the emphasis on practices of relationality from visibility and representation (for example, "Households").

OFFPOLINN's project *IKEA disobedients* also offers us another way to think about queer domesticity. As part of the project, the group interviewed ordinary people in New York City on their domestic life, homes, and how they inhabit their spaces. The wild range of answers is worth noting. One woman turned her living room into a beauty parlor, community daycare, and social club; another woman, a chef at

a well-known Indian restaurant in Queens, considered her “home” her restaurant; another young person lived part-time in student housing and part-time at a friend’s but felt most at “home” playing music in the park; one fellow installed a cabin in his friends’ backyard (a lesbian couple in Park Slope) and provided gardening services in lieu of rent; two same-sex couples shared a house and were developing a LGBTQ+ library in the communal living room; and finally a woman (in Spain) moved into a lesbian squat and transitioned to a man. In other words, all of the people interviewed were engaged in nonnormative domesticity, that is, queer domesticity.

This is Vallerand’s most engaging insight and the central point that runs throughout his book: queer domesticity happens. Queer space is not produced by architects or social planners, but as Vallerand would say, by “users.” Queer domesticity is a practice, not a preexisting space or built environment. It is how we engage the spaces and objects (and how they engage us) that makes a space queer. My parting wish is that the book had contained more diverse perspectives. I understand that Vallerand’s choice of objects was often critical (a critique of the discipline of architecture itself), but I would like to have had more alternative perspectives, especially since there are so many artists of color, non-Western artists, indigenous artists, and queer of color artists who are producing important work on themes of domesticity, queer domesticity, and the “home.”

Despite this critique, *Unplanned Visitors* is an important and original work that opens up a discussion around queerness and the built environment and presses the reader to think beyond normative authorial architectural practices. Its boldness is Vallerand’s insistence that there is no such thing as queer (domestic) space in and of itself: instead, spaces are queered by their inhabitants (how they use and interact with particular spaces and objects). Queer space is thus dynamic, relational, fluid, and in process rather than static. *Unplanned Visitors* should be required reading for those in the field of architecture (professors and students alike) who wish to teach, study, and initiate more collaborative and inclusive architectural projects. But I also think it will appeal to a larger audience of scholars and artists who have an interest in thinking about what makes a “home,” or a domestic space, queer and particularly what it means to queer particular spaces.

References

- Foucault, Michel, 1995. *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books.
- hooks, bell. 2008. *Belonging: A culture of place*. New York: Routledge.

Rosanne Kennedy is a clinical assistant professor at the Gallatin School of Individualized Study at New York University. Her teaching and research interests include political theory, feminist theories, gender studies, continental philosophy, and Rousseau studies. She is the author of *Rousseau in Drag: Deconstructing Gender* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).