

Oliver Vallerand, *Unplanned Visitors: Queering the Ethics and Aesthetics of Domestic Space*, Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020, 264 pp. 82 photos. \$ 34.95 (paper) ISBN 9780228001850

John Potvin

Volume 45, Number 2, 2020

Approaching Home: New Perspectives on the Domestic Interior
Vers la maison : nouvelles perspectives sur l'intérieur domestique

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1073949ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073949ar>

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Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Potvin, J. (2020). Review of [Oliver Vallerand, *Unplanned Visitors: Queering the Ethics and Aesthetics of Domestic Space*, Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020, 264 pp. 82 photos. \$ 34.95 (paper) ISBN 9780228001850]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 45(2), 152–153.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1073949ar>

public: stable homes in which to nurture a practice and, at the scale of human settlements, create new, more responsive reconfigurations of public landscapes. ¶

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1. Mark Wigley, interview with James Coleman, "Mark Wigley on Why Gordon Matta-Clark Matters," *Common Edge*, Jan. 8, 2020, <https://commonedge.org/mark-wigley-on-why-gordon-matta-clark-matters/>.
2. Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Severities Art in America, Part 2," *October* 4 (Autumn 1977): 58–67; 61; 65.
3. Manfred Hecht, as cited in Mary Jane Jacob, *Gordon Matta-Clark, A Retrospective*, exh. cat. (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1985), 73.
4. John Colapinto, "The Real-Estate Artist: High-concept renewal on the South Side," *The New Yorker*, January 13, 2014.
5. Mabel O. Wilson, "'Home of the Oppressed': Democracy, Slavery and American Civic Architecture," 2020 Eduard F. Sekler Talk, Society of Architectural Historians, <https://www.sah.org/2020-virtual-conference/eduard-f-sekler-talk>.
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Oliver Vallerand's *Unplanned Visitors* sets out to investigate how various creative producers, architects, and historians have engaged with the issues and relationships between "gender, sexuality, and the built environment" (3) within a relatively short period of time, from the 1990s to the present. At the heart of the

project is an uncompromising focus on queer space and how historians, theorists, and cultural producers have attempted to define, challenge, or engender some, largely theoretical, form of queer space. Indeed, as Vallerand concludes, queer space is far too nebulous to provide a conclusive definition, given how queer is itself engaged in a never-ending process of redefinition, dismantling, and transformation. Nevertheless, the various case studies, critiques, and theories he explores throughout the book can provide a sustained alternative engagement with architecture and the built environment. What he aims to provide, as a result, is a theoretical and critical assessment of various projects that might be suggestive "for architectural practice, teaching, and histories, building towards a renewed design ethics" (9). In fact, four of the five chapters are full of unique and compelling case studies, largely from the United States, with some exceptions coming from Scandinavia.

These case studies begin with chapter two, which explores what the author identifies as the "emer-

experiment of *Queer Space* (1994), held at the Storefront for Art and Architecture in New York, and *disappeared* (1996) by John Paul Ricco are used as the primary conduits toward an exploration of what constitutes queer space. Both cases, interestingly, focus their attention on users rather than on a (star) architect, as is so often the case within the field. After all, as Vallerand attests, these projects "suggest that users...have a say in how spaces are understood, but at the same time imply that queer uses can merely be added on to existing spaces without really changing them in a more permanent way" (34). Herein lies the rub of attempting to define queer space, at least in part. Far too often, queers, for countless reasons, have had to borrow, repurpose and appropriate any means, spaces, and objects necessary to fashion a life for themselves, to fashion a (queer) space for themselves, including the proverbial closet.

The compelling case of Benjamin Gianni and Mark Robbins's *Who we are and how we live* series of architectural projects, published in 1997 as *Family Values (Honey I'm Home)* in *Architecture of the Everyday* provides literally a set of snap shots (taken from advertisements in gay papers from Ottawa and Columbus, Ohio) peering into the lives of lesbians and gay men, challenging the supposed attributes and stereotypes attached to these identities. In his discussion of the series, Vallerand concludes rather quickly that "most spaces used by queers are hidden throughout ordinary landscapes, that they are a layer among normative symbols of domesticity associated with urban and suburb environments" (36). In many ways, this is an important contribution made by the book, the simple yet still-ignored idea that queers occupy spaces as quotidian and mundane as every and anyone else, located within as well as beyond the confines of normative spaces and environments. Perhaps this idea remains too frightening for many.



ging voices" of the 1990s; a period when queer theory (as developed by theorists like Teresa de Lauretis, David Halperin, Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Michael Warner, and Laurent Berlant) was being theorized, politicized, and came into wider usage outside the academy. Two specific projects, the collective

Chapter three directs the author's gaze to American architect Mark Robbins' project *Households* (2003–06), which sets out to challenge the trite and glossy images of same-sex couples that appear with increased frequency in design periodicals like *Architectural Digest* and *House & Gardens*. For its part, chapter four provides a much lengthier analysis of various works by artist duo Michael Elmgreen (Denmark) and Ingar Dragset (Norway). Specifically, Vallerand examines the fictional, exploratory domestic worlds the duo conjured both in their work *The Collectors* for the Danish and Nordic Pavilions of the 2009 Venice Biennale, and in the much-talked-about *Tomorrow*, a 2013 takeover of various gallery spaces at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London. Both projects were comprehensive (fictional) queer reimaginings of domestic interiors which set out to challenge the steadfast institutional praxis that continues to limit queer involvement and interventions. Finally, chapter five undertakes an exploration of how queers have sought to reimagine architectural space and the built environment, first by turning the gaze to inclusive retirement communities designed by BOOM, and then to Spanish architect Andrés Jaque's transdisciplinary Office of Political Innovation (founded in 2003) and its *IKEA Disobedients*, ending with Swedish project MYCKET, a queer feminist initiative begun in 2012.

By his own admission, Vallerand purposefully avoids “analyzing specific domestic spaces in this project in an attempt to circumvent the limitations of basing observations on only a few spaces, accessible for analysis and thus already detached from ordinary domestic spaces” (10). Rather, the emphasis is placed on theories, critiques, museum and gallery exhibitions, and activist projects, to better understand “how the assumed public/private dichotomy is performed and challenged.” As the subtitle clearly stipulates, the object of analysis is in fact domestic space. With this clear

expectation in mind, it seemed decidedly at odds with this mission that space, architecture, the built environment, and domesticity are conflated throughout the book, with space largely standing in as a catchall, as if domesticity is not an idea(l) and an ideological framework in itself with its own unique traditions, scholarship and baggage. I would go so far as to claim that the domestic is the spectre that haunts both architecture in general and this book in particular.

Additionally, the various case studies and the analyses of them exist as if in a form of transhistorical and transcultural bubble. In chapter five, for example, no broader context or sociopolitical background is provided for the analysis of the feminist queer initiative MYCKET. The unique and much vaunted gender and queer politics of Sweden, as much as the deep-seated concept of the *folkhemmet* (literally referring to Sweden as the People's Home), to cite only two issues, are absent from a discussion of a project that surely speaks to current as much as past issues that plague Swedish society, domesticity, architectural praxis and gender politics. Are we to assume that the term queer, if in use in the countries where these creative projects took place, means the same thing? Likewise, are we to conclude that the assumptions around the traditions that dominate and the terminology used to talk about or critique the domestic are the same or even similar between countries? Among the many challenges of globalization is the assumption of a level playing field and a lack of a recognition of national specificity. Unfortunately, the American-centric understanding of queer sexuality undergirds a universalizing transnational approach that overshadows the uniqueness of each of the creative projects under review in the book. Even the theoretical material—by the author's own admission—focuses on American scholarship of the domestic which has been dominated by the “spectre of the separate spheres theory”

(13) separating the male-dominated world of the public sphere from the woman-driven domestic realm. Given how this notion of the separate spheres continues to dominate scholarship well beyond one single geopolitical entity, this reviewer was struck by the American-centricism of the approach, one that I would contend plagues the methodological framework of the book as a whole.

Unplanned Visitors is one of those rare instances of an attempt to insert queer studies into the study of architecture, a discipline staunchly reticent to tackle such a—by now tried and tested—theoretical and political agenda. For this reason, Vallerand must be commended. Indeed, while other writings on architectural space, queer theory and sexuality more broadly have come before (the work of Aaron Betsky comes to mind here), many of these have been short, incomplete, or plagued by profound limitations. Despite its methodological missteps, what makes this book unique and worthy of attention is its sustained approach toward queering recent architectural critique. ¶

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John Potvin, Marie-Ève Marchand, eds.
Design and Agency: Critical Perspectives on Identities, Histories, and Practices
London/New York: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020

328 pp. 40 b/w illus.
\$115.00 (hardcover) ISBN 9781350063792

Colin Ripley

Agency, as David Fortin points out in his contribution to John Potvin and Marie-Ève Marchand's new book *Design and Agency: Critical Perspectives on Identities, Histories, and Practices*, is