We Are Everywhere

*Queer Space and the Art of Living in Glass Houses*
In 1949, architect Philip Johnson constructed what would become one of his most controversial pieces. Poised on his estate in New Canaan, Connecticut, Glass House (1949) served as a second home for Johnson and his life partner of 45 years, David Whitney. The house from the exterior is visually striking; a rectangular prism composed of floor-to-ceiling class walls with one brick cylinder forming a bathroom and fireplace. There is one freestanding cabinet, one counter, and a minimal amount of furniture. (Kimball, 1994, n.pag.) Despite consensus around its prodigious aesthetic accomplishment, Glass House remains a structure of weighty contention within art and architectural discourse. As a subject of architectural design, Glass House counteracts the usual demands of domestic space, and incites queer feeling in both its spectators and its occupants. By way of its aesthetic extremism and the radical openness of its spatial arrangements, Philip Johnson’s Glass House transposes the notions of a geographical “queerscape” into a domestic environment. (Brent Ingram, 1997, p.100)

The affective aestheticism of Glass House can best be languaged by Kathleen Stewart’s 2008 piece “Weak Theory in An Unfinished World”, in which she attends to affect as being rooted to “cultural poesis”, often experienced as “punctums or punctures” in the experience of daily life. (Stewart, 2008, p.71) Stewart identifies objects of poesis as “textures, rhythms, trajectories, and modes of attunement, attachment, and composition.” (Stewart, 2008, p.71) In the assessment of affective potency, architectural design offers a unique opportunity for engagement with cultural poesis because of its literal attention to textures, rhythms, trajectories and composition, and the ways in which human occupants interact with them. The assumed neutrality of these attentions is indicative of standardized beliefs about human behavioral trajectories. In the domain of queer theory,
adherence to a standardized occupancy of space is a matter of particular concern, evident in both literal and colloquial expression of the lived experience of the queer individual.

As Jean-Ulrick Desert states, “there are many ‘closed’ spaces of queer experience” (Desert, 1997, p.18). He suggests that the conditional acceptance of queer communities is predicated on their existence within private spaces. Ulrick argues that queer communities must often choose committedly between isolationism and publicity. The pursuit of either “repatriation to the dominant culture and...de facto inclusion”, or the staking out of uniquely queer space becomes a site of extreme conflict in the maintenance of identity in queer communities (Ulrick, 1997, p.18). The pursuit of inclusion by isolation, however, is a counterintuitive one. To Ulrick, queerness must be consciously “active and aggressive toward its detractors” and refuse a “veil of secrecy” that may be imposed upon it (Ulrick, 1997, p.18). Isolationism, he argues, marks the effacement of queer culture in its truest sense of being different from the ‘not-queer’ culture it juxtaposes. As an alternative to public presence, “privacy, especially forced privacy, is the closet” (Ulrick, 1997, p.19). It is through the rejected notion of queer space as private space that the theorizing of queer space turns to the notion of ‘openness’. As a task of liberation, queer space pursues the erosion of parameters between private and public spheres. By nature of this erosion, queer spaces lie immanent, requiring activation and the conscious removal of such parameters. Ulrick argues for a sense of the private made public as a manifesto for the creation of queer space. His feeling is echoed forcefully in the stonewall era rally cry, “we are everywhere” (Ulrick, 1997, p.20).

Fundamental to the affective notion of cultural poesis is the possibility that imminent within any cultural object is a “potential [mode] of knowing, relating, and
attending to things”, some buildup of sentimentality reflective of a person or a community’s unique attachments. These unique and imminent “modes of knowing” occur as poesis when they are effectively suspended and sustained in experience, rather than assimilated, as are most objects of design in contemporary culture. (Stewart, 2008, p.71) Glass House suspends and sustains the experience of ‘knowing’ domesticity in its multiple confrontations with traditional domestic environments and domestic behaviors, culminating in an aesthetic object that demonstrates attachment to queer spatial experience and queer sexuality both. Stanley Abercrombie on the philosophy of interior design wrote, “we can live happily with art – some cannot live happily without it – but we cannot live in art or even in a ‘white cube’” (Melchionne, 1998, p.191). A primary source of queer feeling towards Glass House is the sense that its design prioritizes an extreme modernist aesthetic over what are perceived to be realistic habits of occupying space. From the inside of the house, plate glass walls allow for a radial view of the surrounding property. From the outside of the house however, one is offered an unobstructed view into the interior. This queer aspect of the building’s design gives the occupant no relief from an unrelenting self-consciousness at potentially being watched. The immaculate and exiguous interior furnishings of the house further maintain self-consciousness. Within the house, furniture and minute decorative curios are each marked to indicate their correct orderly placement. Such demanding arrangement only exacerbates an occupant’s fear at being observed, or potentially misbehaving their role within the space. Such tensions are queer because they oppose long established traditions of domestic living; they are disruptive to Western values of “dwelling with enclosure, privacy, and relaxation.” (Melchionne, 1998, p. 192)
These traditional values of Western living are reflective of a distinct repertoire of habits” (Melchionne, 1998, p.192). As Judith Halberstam articulates in her piece “Queer Temporalities and Postmodern Geographies”, this repertoire of habits follows a markedly heterosexual middle-class logic; one based on “respectability, and notions of the normal which it depends” (Halberstam, 2005, p.4). Included in this repertoire of respectability are habits of “reproductive temporality”, the use of space and time for the activities of child-rearing and heterosexual monogamy (Halberstam, 2005, p.5). Occluded from this repertoire are temporally queer ways of being, ones perhaps unconcerned with “reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance” (Halberstam, 2005, p.6). The discrepancies between the repertoire of respectability and the trajectories facilitated by the design of Glass House are indicative of differences in the notion of ‘homemaking’. In Western culture, homemaking it typically understood as the maintenance of one’s interior environment, by attention to both aesthetic and design elements of that space (Melchionne, 1998, p.197). Interior domestic environments are uniquely difficult to manage in this sense, because a harmony must be established between the aesthetic quality or “spectacle” of the space, and its facilitation of daily labor (cooking, cleaning and potentially child-rearing) (Melchionne, 1998, p.197). The impossible project of maintaining perfect balance between spectacle and labor in the home is endured in pursuit of what aestheticist Kevin Melchionne terms “grace” (Melchionne, 1998, p.197).

The achievement of so-called ‘grace’ is reflective of the successful cultivation of a particular affective response through the curation of one’s domestic environment. The significance of graceful domestic appearances is that in addition to reflecting potential
material wealth, it has the added effect of implying one’s successful adaptation to their domestic space. An affectively ‘graceful’ balance in tension between spectacle and labor implies not only that the homemaker has acquired the material goods associated with social success, but also that the materials have indeed fulfilled their promises of absolute comfort and luxury. It is in the domain of ‘the home’ and interior design that we may be most convincingly taught that commercial products and their normative arrangements are able to infuse one’s life with true experiential delight. The materiality of this notion is heavily disguised through popular discourse. The notion of ‘coming home’ or ‘being at home’ is one of profound cultural salience, and is largely bound to expectations that are held about one’s incorporation into their domestic environment.

The reception of interior design depends on the experience of an individual at being incorporated into a space. In the case of interior design, individuals are a room’s observer, “but also its content” (Melchionne, 1998, p.199). The way in which an individual experiences themselves as the ‘contents’ of an artwork conspicuously or inconspicuously has significant influences upon their sense of comfortable orientation. One’s position as the contents of an interior space is generally rendered inconspicuous by the distraction offered by material decoration and embellishment. Sara Ahmed’s consideration of human attachment to “Happy Objects” describes the root sources of this kind of distraction. Similarly to Stewart’s notion of affect as “weak theory”, Ahmed acknowledges that affect does not seem to exist independent of objects or ideas. She argues that happiness is a deeply coveted and systemically sought-after affective response, to the detriment of its attainment. The crux of this dilemma is the cultural belief in the attachment of happy affect to particular objects. While the notion of being ‘made’
happy accurately describes affect’s latent “stickiness” to objects and ideas, it places a burdensome emphasis upon happy affect as resulting from classifiable exterior influences. This linguistic emphasis extracts from ‘happiness’ all aspects of spontaneity and organic development, favoring a linear transaction between object and individual, and envisaging a standardized communication of happy affect. The result of this process is a particularly strong cultural attachment to meticulous items that are culturally rumored to hold the affective quality of happiness. Domestic space acts as particularly insidious harbor for these types of objects.

The most salient of all ‘happy objects’ pertain to notions of familial closeness and the happy affects of biological reproduction (Ahmed, 2010, p.29). In the absence of physical bodily presence, the ‘happy objects’ that become representative of such familial bonds are still evident. Picture frames, furnishings, coffee table bric-a-brac, and even messiness, are all happy objects within domestic environments. In the absence of these objects, a different kind of affect is felt. Ahmed argues that the link between objects of happy affect and biological reproduction constitute a degree of marginalization to alternative sexual communities that is complete in its segregation. Through the intangible, but profoundly powerful process of identifying ‘happy objects’ in society, individuals not capable of or not desiring biological reproduction are effectively “alienated from the promise of happiness” (Ahmed, 2010, p.41). In the space left by detachment from normative happy objects, there is a vastness and a space of questioning for the “affective alien” (Ahmed, 2010, p.41). Given this circumstance, it is up to the subject to reconcile a new way of pursuing happy affect. The design of Glass House does not make any attempt to feign attachments to the normative objects of happy affect, nor
does it aggressively subvert them through alternative attachment. Rather, it suspends a sense of affective alienation in its suspense of intermediate vacancy. The sparseness of the interior space offers no solution to the absence of normative happy objects, and in so doing, offers no relief to the occupant who may search for affective cues for how to behave in the indoor space. An occupant in the house may find their role as the content of the space too central and conspicuous, or devoid of social cue. Such is the affective position of queerness in the sense that Ulrick presents; it is an affective position of having to choose isolation from, or disingenuous cooperation with one’s social environment. As the interior design of Glass House does not facilitate affective indulgence in objects, the feeling of being the contents of the work is all the more pronounced. There is no refuge from one’s exposure to the surrounding landscape. The bareness of the interior design works in tandem with the openness of the surrounding landscape to add to an affective sense of exposure. The exposure to outside space imposes upon the occupant the sense of being a flaneur; the occupant is on the outside of society, even from an interior situation. It is queer precisely because “it is at once private and public” (Ulrick, 1997, p.21).

Many who doubt the livability of Glass House protest its lack of privacy with particular adamancy. The exterior space of Glass House is drastically open and distinctly park-like in its landscape. The need for privacy, and the need to starkly separate public and private domain is the site of perceived interest for Gordon Brent Ingram. The exposure of queer communities in open public spaces, he believes, is socially threatening precisely because it is revealing of counterhegemonic social behaviors as they typically occur in private quarters. Specifically, the linkage between public park spaces and queer communities conjures the histories and controversies around public park spaces and the
emergence of “queer enclaves” of sexual contact (Ingram, 1997, p.95). In an address of queer environmental design, Ingram articulates that almost every urban area in the world has “public outdoor areas regularly frequented by members of sexual minorities” (Ingram, 1997, p.96). To non-members of these communities, the notion of this public activity is doubly offensive, as it suggests a queer (atypical) type of social exchange, in addition to gay sexual acts. The idea of casual sexual contact in public places tends to be thought of far differently than the same actions as they might take place by means of the “formal introductions, parlors, and bedrooms of the sexual revolution” (Ingram, 1997, p.99). There is a way in which the queer occupation of public space is considered particularly egregious, in terms of ‘openness’ itself.

Historically, the design of European and North American park areas have been predicated on values of social promenade, repressed sexuality, and the heterosexual male gaze; established as “places of androcentric heterosexual desire, courtship, and conquest.” (Brent Ingram, 1997, p.102) The design of ‘open’ public space with this intent continues to be successful because spatial arrangement is a largely imperceptible force of hegemony. It does not call attention to itself, nor does the social majority consciously feel its affects. As Melchionne writes, “design leads and habit follows” (Melchionne, 1998, p.192). There are many instances of ‘open’ space being maintained on a surface level, with modifications of design added to repress the emergence of queer space. “Homophobia by design”, is the term Ingram uses to describe environmental design projects such as the installation of highway dividers commissioned by the British Columbia Ministry of Highways in 1994 (Ingram, 1997, p.98). The dividers were installed in order to limit the parking and subsequent access to a public beach known
through the late 1980s and early 1990s to be a well established lesbian scene. As a public space, the beach sparked controversy and aggression from local residents and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in response to the presence of “women who might possibly be lesbians” (Ingram, 1997, p.97). Social fear of the immanence of queer space, and an aversion to the presence of queer communities in open spaces is played upon in the relation of Glass House to its exterior environment. The parameters of public and private space are wholly effaced, as both the exterior and interior spaces of the house are exposed to a 360-degree view. Glass House raises an affective anxiety around public access to queer domesticity, as everything within the house is perceptible from the outside, and everything on the outside is apparent to the occupants of the house. The affect of Glass House evokes a queer feeling that grasps every ‘thing’ and every ‘place’ within sight.

For space to be ‘open’ suggests a myriad of different qualities. The ‘openness’ of space becomes synonymous with its being unobstructed, free of restriction, and easily available. The ‘openness’ of space to the interactions of sexually minoritarian communities is subversive because it implies more broadly that public spaces are “open to freely chosen and spontaneous actions of people” (Ingram, 1997, p.97). This attitude towards public space is destabilizing to the socially engrained understanding of appropriate ways of being in public spaces in its emphasis on the autonomous interactions of people in public spaces. Philip Johnson’s Glass House allows us to glimpse the real possibility of such spaces in its assiduous attention to the way in which affect is everything, and queer space is everywhere.
Works Cited


