

# **Review: *Unplanned Visitors: Queering the Ethics and Aesthetics of Domestic Space***

By Olivier Vallerand. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020. ISBN: 9780228001850. 246 pp.

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Architecture has been slow to take up the epistemological developments taking place in feminist and queer scholarship of the past decades. Apart from a few noteworthy publications and exhibitions in the 1990s and early 2000s, queer architectural practice has remained marginal, until a recent resurgence of interest in the topic. Among the publications brought forth by this renewed interest, Olivier Vallerand's *Unplanned Visitors: Queering the Ethics and Aesthetics of Domestic Space* (2020) stands out through its theoretical rigour and original subject matter. The book compiles a short and selective history of how architects, artists, theorists, and historians have critically considered the relations between gender, sex, and the built environment in the past thirty years. To unearth their queer critiques of architecture, Vallerand turns his gaze to representations of domesticity in exhibitions, photography and film, art installations, and temporary architectural interventions. He first considers how queer critiques of space are represented in these artworks and installations and then evaluates how they have impacted the architectural design practice. As such, the book is loosely arranged around two threads: the first a chronological one, generally moving forward in time as the chapters progress, and the second relating to the nature of the representations of domesticity in the different case studies, moving from more theoretical and speculative critiques towards those integrated in the design of lived spaces.

Vallerand's extensive research bears its fruit already in the first chapter, which is reserved for laying out his theoretical framework. One of the issues the author addresses is the different understandings of 'queer' in architectural discourse. Vallerand rejects mainstream understandings of the word as an umbrella term for non-heterosexual people, criticising early explorations of queer space which are aligned with such non-problematized identity-based understandings as Aaron Betsky's well-known *Queer Space* (1997). Instead, the author's conception of queerness is strongly grounded in academic queer theory for which Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Sara

Ahmed, among others, have laid down the groundwork. ‘Less a discourse around an identity than a critique of conventional identity politics’ (2020, 18), Vallerand’s understanding of queerness is both political in challenging hetero- and homonormativity and non-essentializing in its focus on exposing and critiquing the constructedness of identity categories.

Up to here, this may sound like old wine in new bottles to anyone who is familiar with queer studies. The merit of Vallerand’s study, however, lies in how he applies queer theory as a mode of critical enquiry to questions of the built environment. Without a doubt, others before him have employed the term ‘queer space theory’ to demarcate a field of study where queer theory, architecture and social geography overlap/intersect; however, I have not come across an earlier work which fleshes out the principles of this domain so clearly and rigorously. Queer space, he writes, is ‘continually in the process of being constructed in opposition not only to heteronormativity but also to broader prescriptive norms’ (2020, 20). According to Vallerand, queer space must not be understood as the materialization of essential identity characteristics but as *relational*, meaning it only exists by virtue of its opposition to the norm, and *performative*, because it is constantly in the process of taking place. As such, queer space theory allows for a better understanding of the exclusionary and oppressive effects of architecture, which result from the way that certain building typologies and conventions uphold and reiterate normative codes of gender and sexuality.

Because the theoretical foundations of *Unplanned Visitors* are strongly laid out and consistently applied throughout the text, Vallerand’s application of queer theory to questions of architecture and the built environment is close to watertight. One way in which the book delivers on its promises is in its successful deconstruction of public and private, notions that are omnipresent in architectural debates. Building on feminist challenges to the gendering of domestic life, Vallerand demonstrates that the opposition of private and public is a historically constructed binary which has sustained the design of oppressive and unsafe spaces. His analysis of a series of exhibitions from the 1990s, in particular, problematizes the conflation of the domestic with the private by showing that domestic spaces are always already exposed to the public gaze, while at the same time public spaces such as bars and parks are constantly queered through acts of intimacy which according to normative views belong to the ‘private’ realm of the bedroom. His book convincingly demonstrates that binary understandings such as public/private do not reflect the fluid complexity of actual spaces nor the people who inhabit them.

Furthermore, the book advocates for a much-needed shift in architectural discourse from high design aesthetics towards a focus on banal everyday spaces such as the house, where oppression

is experienced by many on a daily basis. With projects like the *House Rules* exhibition at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Washington (1994), the second chapter of the book presents strong challenges to the idea of the home as safe haven, while also showing how queer living constellations have navigated the constricting setup of the traditional American suburban home. As such, the work underscores the need for architecture to reconcile its aesthetic dimension, reflected in formalist approaches dominant in both its historiography and practice, with the ethics of designing the built environment.

Another commendable contribution of *Unplanned Visitors* to the architectural discourse is that it expands the notion of what is considered as ‘architecture’ by blurring the boundaries between art and architecture. Vallerand rests his queer critique of domesticity on an analysis of artworks, exhibitions, installations, and temporary architectural interventions from outside the narrow confines of architecture. The third and fourth chapters of the book contain some very interesting explorations of the way that domesticity is put on display in the photography of architect Mark Robbins (chapter 3) and in the large-scale installations of Scandinavian artists Elmgreen and Dragset (chapter 4). Through these examinations, the author recovers an important and valuable strand of queer thinking in architecture from the margins of architectural history.

Vallerand shows that art installations and exhibitions can be powerful rhetorical devices with the capacity to challenge institutions and normative understandings of space and architecture in a way that built architecture cannot. While *Unplanned Visitors* certainly affirms the power of speculative design, herein lies one of its limitations at the same time: when these critiques are applied to actual projects much of their critical value is lost. The BOOM retirement communities for LGBT+ elderly discussed by Vallerand forms a case in point. The author observes that, despite good intentions of inclusivity, the design is geared primarily towards privileged white gay male couples. The project thus demonstrates the difficulties of translating critiques that are easily presented through installations into actual architecture projects, which are constrained by building regulations, budget, clients’ wishes and so on.

Finally, although the scope of Vallerand’s queer theoretical lens in *Unplanned Visitors* reaches beyond gender and sexuality to consider intersections with other markers of difference, his selection of the projects he discusses is not free from its own limitations. The author sets out to correct the tendency of early explorations of queer space to investigate spaces designed by and for (mostly) affluent white gay men. Throughout his book he consistently points out when ‘queer’ is conflated with ‘gay’ whenever his objects of analysis ‘fall into the largely masculinist inclination of much “queer” work’ (2020, 72), as is the case in, for example, the publications of

Aaron Betsky and Henry Urbach, or the photographic work of Mark Robbins. However, a closer look at the selection of works discussed in the book shows that the author is not able to completely escape this masculinist inclination himself either: it includes only one explicitly non-male case study, namely Swedish queer feminist collective MYCKET. Moreover, although he highlights how gender and sexuality are closely intertwined with class and race throughout his analysis, lower-class and racialized subjects remain underrepresented, if not entirely absent from his selected projects, making his study at best a partial history of queer critiques of the built environment.

One last aspect that I have found valuable is the fact that the extensive bibliography of the book, compiled over a period of ten years of research, reads like a compendium of sources that are relevant to the field of queer space theory. For one, it shows how much intellectual labour has been done already. Sadly, I share Vallerand's conclusion that these queer critiques of space and architecture have not led to a discernible transformation of the design profession. The author ends on the somewhat positive note that early North-American queer space theorists, who played an important role in architecture education, have managed to create an opening towards diversity in architecture. From my own (limited) experience with Dutch architectural education, a structural inclusion of feminist and queer thought in architectural pedagogies has yet to materialize, although queer feminist theory has entered some European architecture schools, such as Manchester, Zürich, Stockholm, and the Bartlett London. Nonetheless, *Unplanned Visitors* is an excellent contribution to the fields of both architecture and queer theory. I am hopeful that reading the book will convince architects, designers, theorists and historians alike of the necessity to consider the exclusionary and oppressive ways in which social norms shape architectural space.

## REFERENCES

- Betsky, Aaron. 1997. *Queer space: architecture and same-sex desire*. New York, NY: Morrow.  
 Vallerand, Olivier. 2020. *Unplanned Visitors: Queering the Ethics and Aesthetics of Domestic Space*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.