Imminent Domain: Queer Space in the Built Environment
Author(s): Christopher Reed
Source: Art Journal, Vol. 55, No. 4, We’re Here: Gay and Lesbian Presence in Art and Art History (Winter, 1996), pp. 64-70
Published by: College Art Association
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/777657
Accessed: 08/01/2009 11:56

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=caa.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

College Art Association is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to Art Journal.
Although the idea of queer space has provoked the interest of cultural theorists, political activists, and utopian dreamers, little attention has been paid to its visual aspect. This reflects, in part, the conservatism of the design professions, which have been slow to acknowledge issues of sexual identity. But it reflects, as well, an ontological problem: queer space may be a contradiction in terms. Some would argue that queerness, as an ineffable ideal of oppositional culture, is so fluid and contingent that the idea of a concrete queer space is an oxymoron. I prefer to define queerness historically as an identity, arising in the 1980s through the confluence of the relatively separate gay and lesbian movements of the previous decade, joining not just gays and lesbians, but all manner of sex/gender scofflaws under a simple in-your-face term.1 As a historical phenomenon, its spatial signifiers can be charted and analyzed.

Even some who might accept the historical specificity of queerness, however, question the possibility of its embodiment as landscape or building. There Is No “Queer Space,” Only Different Points of View was the title of Brian McGrath’s installation for the 1994 Queer Space exhibition at the Store Front for Art and Architecture in New York. This statement ran at eye level along a semicircular plexiglass screen showing computer-generated images of various Manhattan locales. The project statement explained: “‘Queer space’ exists potentially everywhere in the public realm. . . . it is the individual’s appropriation of the public realm through personal, ever-changing points of view.” Similar claims have been made at the scale of the single building. In the Wexner Center’s 1994 House Rules show, architects Benjamin Gianni and Scott Weir presented Queers in (Single-Family) Space, a design for a suburban house to accommodate a variety of living arrangements (fig. 1). Gianni and Weir tie their design’s flexibility to the looseness of the term queer, but reject any further links. “Sexuality exceeds the purview of the architect,” they say; queerness “is more a strategy than a space.”5 Whether in the landscape or at home, these arguments run, queerness is constituted, not in space, but in the body of the queer: in his/her inhabitation, in his/her gaze.

Such arguments contain a kernel of truth: queer space is the collective creation of queer people. But that doesn’t mean it disappears when we leave. I am interested in the way our traces remain to mark certain spaces for others—to their delight or discomfort—to discover. Gianni and Weir, in contrast, propose an invisible queerness. They accept that in the suburbs, “difference is accommodated as long as it is kept out of sight.” Their design refrains from “breaching the social contract of community consensus.” Its queerness is “not visible on the exterior.” This they call “playing it straight.” But playing it straight is not queer at all, not in your face (the phrase implies a visual confrontation), and is perilously close to the closet (a withdrawal from contested space). In fact, studies of so-called suburban homosexuals correlate their rejection of queer neighborhoods with closeting and with attitudes described as apolitical, “intensely individualist and assimilationist.”4 I am unwilling to cede the constitutive potential of queer space, especially at a time when some spaces—gay neighborhoods and lesbian communes, for instance—signify queerness clearly enough to come under homophobic attack.5

Arguments for the impossibility of queer space rely on a false binary, one that has been ably critiqued as a myth of spatial immanence and a fallacy of spatial relativism. The first is the notion, self-evidently bizarre on close inspection . . . that there is a singular, true reading of any specific landscape involved in the mediation of identity. On the other hand, it is invidious and disingenuous to suggest that each and every reading of a specific landscape is of equal value or of equal validity; such notions lead to an entirely relativist notion of spatiality.5

In short, no space is totally queer or completely unqueerable, but some spaces are queerer than others. The term I propose for queer space is imminent: rooted in the Latin imminere, to loom over or threaten, it means ready to take place. For both advocates and opponents, the notion of queerness is threatening indeed. More fundamentally, queer space is space in the process of, literally, taking place, of claiming territory.
Despite their theoretical claims to the contrary, the two projects I have mentioned, both by queer-identified architects, exemplify the imminence of queer space, for neither enacts the extreme spatial relativism proposed by its supporting documents. McGrath’s juxtaposition of the Rambles in Central Park, the piers off Christopher Street, and the subway line in between assumes a stable identity of the first two spaces as sites of male homoeroticism in order to suggest that similar dynamics queer the nominally straight space of the subway as well. Likewise, Gianni and Weir’s presentation drawings for the invisibly queer house are peppered with inescapably queer imagery. Floor plans and exterior views, along with images of conventional nuclear families, are collaged among pornographic sketches, fistfuls of condoms, ads for gay clubs, and campy artworks that themselves recombine images of domesticity and sex (fig. 1). Both projects resist naïve notions of a separate and essential queer space, but despite their theoretical willingness to disappear, both, in practice, insist on taking place, documenting or creating queer spaces. The imminence of these queer spaces finds its counterpart in projects—both professionally designed and vernacular—that make a queer mark on the physical environment. This essay surveys the terrain of queer space on the scale of the monument, the neighborhood, and the building.

Most visible—and least typical—are the monuments: George Segal’s Gay Liberation in Greenwich Village (fig. 2) and the Homomonument in Amsterdam. The first is both more conventional—conventionally monumental, conventionally realistic, conventionally gendered—and less liked. During thirteen years of controversy between its commission in 1979 and its installation in 1992, the statue was bitterly disowned by many in the movement it sought to honor. Explicit to the point of banality, the two life-sized couples couldn’t be less imminent. They remain ossified in the past, a historical moment that is not the 1969 Stonewall riot the statue nominally commemorates, but the late 1970s. More than the specifics of clothing and hairstyle, the figures are locked by their attitudes—genders segregated and PDAs (public displays of affection) tentative—into an unwitting parody of mainstream perceptions of a prequeer lesbian and gay movement.7

Karin Daan’s 1987 Homomonument is both subtler and more assertive. With its three massive triangles of pink granite referring explicitly to the Nazi persecution of homosexuals (references intensified by its proximity to the Anne Frank memorial), the Homomonument is not shy about alluding to oppression. Yet the placement of the elements at some distance from each other—one in the canal, one in the pavement of the city square, the third raised like a dais—makes the whole sculpture hover on the border of invisibility, creating a zone not immediately recognizable but then suddenly overwhelming in its scale. Conceived as a “living monument,” the success of the Homomonument may be gauged from its simultaneous popularity as a site of queer pilgrimage, marked with daily floral tributes, and its virtual invisibility in art history.8 Manifesting another form of imminence, the Homomonument disappears as art in order to emerge as the embodiment of a community.

The unrecognizability of the Homomonument as art
links it to vernacular queer monuments in many cities. One of the most touching examples of queer space I know lies along the shore of Lake Michigan in Chicago’s Lincoln Park. There a series of carefully tended little gardens abutting the gay sunbathing area are dedicated (for instance, with a red ribbon painted on a rock) to the memory of the community’s dead. Colorful graffiti marks the shoreline rocks with rainbow flags, quotations from queer books, and names of famous queers (fig. 3). The pounding winter surf makes the perseverance of the gardens and graffiti evidence of constant work by many hands. On hot summer weekends, this space is the center of a queer spectacle of nearly naked flesh and competing boom boxes; on rainy, cooler days the space remains as a physical index of queerness within the normative public (read straight) realm of the park.

More than formal monuments, such collective and ad hoc interventions into the landscape typify the spaces of queer community. It is important to stress the novelty of such signs, however. In the seventies an architecture journal bemoaned the “almost total invisibility of gay life in LA,” while a study of the shuttered and camouflaged street facades, mazelike entryways, and intimidating signage of gay and lesbian bars concluded that these spaces incorporate and reflect certain characteristics of the gay community: secrecy and stigmatization. They do not accommodate the eyes of outsiders, they have low imageability. This look (or antilook) characterized not only bars, but the women’s bookstores and cafés of the 1970s that, in the name of safety, faced the public with barriers, curtained windows, and intimidating signage. By the early 1990s, however, academic studies and popular media alike were noting the adaptation of “Queer Street [to] an increasingly confident generation of lesbians and gay men whose sense of Pride means that they want to be visible.”

Scholars in a variety of fields have documented the historical formation, physical boundaries, and social structures of such neighborhoods. Their standard methods privilege verbal and quantifiable data, however, overlooking issues of symbolic space. The more avant-garde methodologies of cultural geography are worse, evincing an outright spectophobia that disdains “visual presencing” in favor of imagined space. Thus the claim that “there are no public expressions of lesbian sexualities; no mark on the landscape that ‘lesbians live here.’” Queer space is short-changed either way. The conventional scholarship homogenizes queer space, often ignoring nonresidents who seek out such neighborhoods to socialize and shop, thus overlooking the way demographically gay or lesbian neighborhoods become home to a wide variety of queers. This shortcoming grows more important as the waning of seventies separatism imposes—or, arguably, restores—a queer cast on previously gender-segregated communities. At the same time, the total exclusion of visual analysis from recent cultural geography belittles the impulses and achievements of communities that create queer space, and neglects the habits of vision queers develop to recognize it.

There are obvious signs of queer space, both institutional and symbolic: lesbian archives and gay bars among the former, rainbow flags and Amazon bumper stickers among the latter. Of course, no single sign creates a space, but their accumulation, an index of the impulses of many individuals, marks certain streets as queer space.

Other signs are subtler and respond to the specific social forms of queer culture. For instance, queer space is marked by a high density of storefront and housefront display, responding to the presence of significant pedestrian traffic even in cities that are otherwise automobile-based and at times when other areas are deserted. This passage could describe queer districts in any number of American or European cities, though its referent is farther afield: “While most of downtown Johannesburg is deserted by six or seven in the evening, Hillbrow stays open all night. There are sidewalk cafés, book and record shops, movie theatres, and Indian and Near Eastern restaurants. Vendors hawking sandstone hippos and wooden sculpture set up shop on sidewalks.”

The apparently international ubiquity of queer space exemplifies the expression of identity under capitalism, though there is no evidence for the common claim that queer culture is more commercial than other forms of identity. Such claims combine stereotypes of wealthy gay men with research carried out in bars and discos that present obvious and distinctive—though not necessarily representative—queer loci. Overlooked are the student groups, social service and political organizations, potluck clubs, and other noncommercial venues where many of us came to conceive our sexuality as the basis of community. Assumptions about the nonmarket bases of comparative forms of identity, moreover, are sustained only by ignoring the commercial aspect of Chinatowns or Little Italies. Indeed, queer space in the public realm echoes the forms of diasporic ethnic neighborhoods under capitalism, offering analogous symbolic markers (bumper stickers, graffiti, banners, official and unofficial monuments) and institutional amenities (specialty shops, meeting places, and places to post announcements).

The pedestrian attraction (pedephilia?) of queer space runs deeper, however. Sally Munt has analyzed the figure of the “lesbian flâneur,” counterpart of the male strollers depicted or implied in the urban spaces of Impressionist paintings. Closely allied with the dandy, the flâneur has long been associated with a risqué male sexuality, but Munt traces a female heritage, running from the transvestite George Sand, through Djuna Barnes and Renée Vivien, to Joan Nestle and Sarah Schulman. It is not this literary legacy that made Munt herself a flâneur, however. It was a place, Brighton, England, where
sexual ambiguity is present on the street, in its architecture, from the orbicular tits of King George’s Pavilion onion domes, to the gigantic plaster dancer’s legs which extrude invitingly above the entrance to the alternative cinema. . . . Brighton constructed my lesbian identity, one that was given to me by the glance of others, exchanged by the looks I gave them, passing—or not passing—in the street.17

Munt’s interrogation of the rituals of the street suggests lines of potential inquiry into the subtler elements of queer space. This work has just begun. Benjamin Forest, pioneering in a field he calls “humanistic geography,” catalogued the meanings of West Hollywood as a “gay city” by studying its representation in the gay press. In addition to reaffirming queer space as the site of entertainment and street life, these papers repeatedly suggest that the look of West Hollywood manifests a creativity and aesthetic sensibility specific to gays. The Pacifica Design Center downtown “stands as a postmodern cathedral for a thoroughly design-conscious community,” says one article, while another imagines the city under gay governance adorned with sculpture, sprinkled with pocket parks, crisscrossed by “colorful open-air mini-buses,” and commissioning “local architects and designers to create special bus benches, sidewalks and refuse containers.” Forest concludes that the press often “represented beauty as the rightful domain of gays.”18 Like the flâneur, the turn-of-the-century figure of the Aesthete (from Oscar Wilde to Romaine Brooks) informs such notions of queer space as high-design space. These two trends intersect in that site of pedestrian spectacle, the shop window—and, of course, window dressing is among the most stereotypical of gay professions. In New York, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Stonewall riots was marked by an ambitious historical program using both storefront window displays and walking tours.19

It’s about time. Another subtle element of queer space is its engagement with the past. From San Francisco to South Beach, whether Victorian or moderne, former fishing village or industrial zone, queer space is renovated space. More than simply a question of style, renovation is a process of taking place, often by opening smaller spaces into larger ones, whether on the scale of the room, the pocket park, or the plaza. “I’ve never met a gay man who hasn’t taken down a wall,” one architecture student told me. The obvious metaphors of knocking down barriers and opening up closets are clearly relevant to queer identity. At an extreme, the loft residence of the gay interior designer Alan Buchsbaum, a pioneer in the conversion of commercial lofts to domestic use, has no interior doors at all, even on the two lofts.20

FIG. 2 George Segal, Gay Liberation, white bronze, 1979–92, Sheridan Square, New York.
It is worth speculating further about the relationship between queerness and renovation. Renovation—not synonymous with restoration—transforms what the dominant culture has abandoned so that old and new are in explicit juxtaposition. One connection is camp, that long-time sign of gay culture (compared by Esther Newton to soul in black culture) that has been seized as a badge of queer identity. Definitions, though notoriously vague, stress the reclamation (often through nostalgia) of what has been devalued in a way that exposes (often through exaggeration and incongruity) the structure of assumptions undergirding normative values. Emphasizing Victorian ornamentation or Art Deco detailing seem clear applications of this principle, as do the architectural gestures that expose structural fabric. The aesthetic of renovated space—where track-lights and parquet floors meet exposed bricks and steel girders like pancake makeup over five-o'clock shadow—can be read as a form of camp.

Of course, not just any old, high-style, pedestrian-friendly space is queer space. Or rather, these signifiers are imminent, and context is critical to their signification of the difference implied in the process of taking place (the crowds on the sidewalk of the Montrose region of a car-centered city like Houston, for instance, would not register place being taken in Manhattan). Moreover, the markers of queer space move quickly beyond queer communities, just as disco, blue jeans, and piercing have been subject to a trickle-down popularity that makes them dubious markers of contemporary queer identity though no less part of the history of queer culture. This overlap is particularly clear in architecture. The signs of queer neighborhood—an orientation toward small-scale display and a playful fascination with history—when manifested on the scale of the individual building are significantly coincident with what is called postmodernism.

Although Charles Jencks's genealogy of postmodern architecture cites an element he calls the Gay Eclectic style, for the most part the queerness of postmodern architecture has been either exaggerated to the point of caricature or resolutely ignored. Architecture is an expensive business and queer organizations tend to be thriftily encamped in facilities designed for previous users. Designed-to-be-queer space—appropriately enough for an identity rooted in the "private" sphere of sexuality—is overwhelmingly domestic space, yet the documentation and theorization of queer space have neglected the home.

The dominant culture’s unwillingness to recognize queer domesticity is evidenced politically in opposition to same-sex marriage or domestic partnership rights, and manifested visually in the erasure of same-sex relationships in interior design journals. But ambivalence about queer domesticity characterizes queer self-representation as well. Of the fourteen projects in the 1994 Queer Space exhibition, none proposed a queer domestic space, and domesticity was framed, in the one project that addressed it, as a site of assimilation. In Family Values Benjamin Gianni and Mark Robbins asked gays and lesbians in two small cities (Columbus, Ohio, and Ottawa, Ontario) to submit snapshots of their homes "to explore (and explode)
stereotypes about the gay community, who we are and how we live.” Pictures were solicited with a flyer that contrasted images of a gay dance club and a house. The text, extrapolating from the dubious figure that 10 percent of the population is gay, asked the whereabouts of the 115,000 “homosexuals” supposedly in Columbus but not among the 5,000 in the queer public spaces of “bars, clubs, or cruising areas,” and asserted that, while some live in “gay ghettos . . . the majority of gay people live among their heterosexual neighbors. Some of us react against normative symbols of domesticity, others of us embrace them.”

Confirming this assertion of assimilationist impulses, none of the homes finally featured in Family Values present a queer exterior, and the installation won favorable reviews for the way it manifested both the “banality” of gay and lesbian home life and the “de-eroticization of queerness.” But are these our only choices? A public realm of “bars, clubs, or cruising areas” or a realm of undifferentiated domesticity where we blend “de-eroticized” with our heterosexual neighbors? Such binaries ignore both the broad range of queer public space and the imminence of queer domesticity.

The image of contemporary queer domesticity acquires meaning from the look of our forebears’ homes: the fantastic interiors created by that quintessentially gay figure, the interior decorator, no less than the equally extravagant architecture of feminist utopias. Best documented as spectacle, extravagant interior décor signifies gay space in Hollywood movies like Pillow Talk (1959) and The Gay Deceivers (1969). This look, especially as it was filtered through popular culture, of course reflected stereotypes of homosexuality as artificial, impractical, and nonprocreative (unsuitable for children). By conferring a roster of recognizable signs on gay identity, however, such stereotypes unwittingly concretized what had been unimaginable. Notions of women’s space (both built and imagined), though they lacked the mixed blessing of mainstream media representations, were, likewise, central to prequeer constructions of lesbian identity. In the 1970s architect Phyllis Birkby documented the domes and swirls of the women-made houses she described as “inclusive sheltering gestures, gentle containments that . . . provide a sense of inward psychological and physical security.” More extravagant are the “fantasy drawings” she collected, in which women sketched houses with “retirement and revival circles” and zones for “private strokes and escapes.”

To judge from the photos submitted for the Family Values installation, queers in Columbus and Ottawa—despite their houses’ exterior conformity—configure their interiors as queer space. Some are overtly high style. Others restore or recycle unmentionable furnishings. Still others echo the impulses—if not quite the extravagance—of earlier queer domesticity: one gay couple’s interior features at least thirty-eight croquet mallets, while the bedroom of a lesbian couple is an attic, empty but for a bed and a rocking chair holding a large teddy bear. Spaces of extravagant eccentricity, spaces of private retreat, these are (some of) the domestic spaces of queerness. The success of Gianni and Robbins’s Family Values project is in registering the queerness imminent in places like Columbus and Ottawa.

This short essay can do no more than open the study of queer space as a form of visual culture. It goes (almost) without saying that the typology I have outlined is subjective and partial. I have neglected spaces better left to more qualified observers (women-only encampments and festivals) or tangential to my definition of queerness as an inclusive activist identity (spaces of clandestine gay sex).

In the interest of brevity, I have also neglected temporary queer spaces created by artists and architects in galleries, and by queer communities in the form of demonstrations, street parties, and parades. Along with the monuments, neighborhoods, and structures I have analyzed, these manifest an identity that—as its rallying cry, “We’re here! We’re queer!” proclaims—insists on taking place.

Notes
5. Attacks on spaces identified as queer are ubiquitous and ongoing. As this was written, the news reported a siege of a lesbian ranch in Mississippi and a series of murders near gay bars and cruising areas in Texas. For scholarly overviews, see Gary David Comstock, Violence against Lesbians and Gay Men (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); and Gregory M. Herek and Kevin T. Berrill, eds., Hate Crimes: Confronting Violence against Lesbians and Gay Men (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1992).


13. Gill Valentine, “Out and About: Geographies of Lesbian Landscapes,” *International Journal of Urban Research* 19, no. 1 (1995): 99; a near-identical sentence reappears in Bell and Valentine, *Mapping Desire*, 6. In both discussions Valentine misrepresents Peake’s analysis of the lesbian community in Grand Rapids (see n. 11), which actually describes street parties, a restaurant, plans for more businesses, and an organizer’s concern to “keep the streetscape intact” (pp. 426–27)—all evidence of a will to make lesbian identity visible within the urban fabric. Valentine’s subject community, in contrast, manifested highly proscriptive notions concerning visibility, excluding SM dykes who failed to “conform to the prevailing lesbian feminist definition of ‘what a lesbian should look like’” (p. 103), a sensibility contiguous with Valentine’s decision to keep her subjects anonymous (invisible) and her dismissal of queerness (p. 109).

14. Urban gay neighborhoods—West Hollywood, the Castro, and Greenwich Village—emerged from communities identified with a range of nonconformist identities (sociological studies use terms like beatnik and counterculture) analogous to queerness. Even in small cities, such as Albuquerque, gays and lesbians formed a more integrated community before the 1970s, when academic feminists, whom the locals dubbed “Boston crazies,” imported separatist ideas of sexual identity. See Trish Fransen, “Differences and Identities: Feminism and the Albuquerque Lesbian Community,” *Signs* 18, no. 4 (1993): 891–906.


18. From *Frontiers* [gay newspaper], 1983–84, quoted in Forest, “West Hollywood,” 143–44. Forest’s analysis is limited by its exclusive focus on gay papers, although “lesbians were at least as important as gay men in the activities of the [West Hollywood] incorporation campaign . . . and the first mayor was a lesbian” (p. 135).


20. I am indebted for this example to Frederic Schwartz, whose anthology on Buchsbaum is forthcoming from Rizzoli.


23. Urbach, “Peeking.”

24. This common misreading of Kinsey’s early study conflates the percentage of men who acknowledged predominant homosexual desires with those who adopt a homosexual social identity. Recent studies suggest that 2 to 5 percent of the population identifies as gay, while they confirm roughly 10 percent of men have significant homosexual experience. The implication: many of Columbus’s 10 percent are at home with their opposite-sex spouses.


27. Sites of clandestine sexual encounter precede other spatial and institutional manifestations of gay and queer identity for many men, and can promote gay communities (see Newton, *Cherry Island*, 181–96). Often they remain the only public sites of gay or queer culture (Jerry Lee Kramer, “Bachelor Farmers and Spinsters: Gay and Lesbian Identities and Communities in Rural North Dakota,” in Bell and Valentine, *Mapping Desire*, 200–213). But they are also places where men who reject those identities have sex with other men. In this sense they are un- or even anti-queer. Ironically—Foucault would say, predictably—despite their apparent lawlessness and secrecy, these spaces are often tightly policed. The dominant culture’s juridical priorities have made them far more analyzed and publicized than other spatial manifestations of queer culture; an early study is Laird Humphreys, *Tea Room Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places* (Chicago: Aldine, 1970). Recently, much journalistic literature has been generated over bathhouses and sex clubs. Though less fertile, these generally remain gender-segregated, and hence, by my definition, are problematically queer. Qualms over opening such spaces to a potentially juridical gaze are registered, though not resolved, in Henry Urbach’s “Spatial Rubbing: The Zone,” *Sites* 25 (1993): 90–95.

CHRISTOPHER REED teaches at Lake Forest College. He has edited two books: A Roger Fry Reader and Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture.