Henry Urbach
Closets, Clothes, disClosure

The word closet holds two distinct but related meanings. On the one hand, a closet is a space where things are stored. In this regard, we might say, “Your clothes are in the closet.” But when we observe that “Joe has been in the closet for years,” we are concerned less with his efforts to match trousers and tie than with how he reveals his identity to others. In this sense, the closet refers to the way that identity, particularly gay identity, is concealed and disclosed. Concealed and disclosed because gay identity is not quite hidden by the closet, but not quite displayed either. Rather, it is represented through coded gestures that sustain the appearance of uncertainty.

These two closets are not as different as they might appear. Taken together, they present a related way of defining and ascribing meaning to space. They both describe sites of storage that are separated from, and connected to, spaces of display. Each space excludes but also needs the other. The non-room, the closet, houses things that threaten to soil the room. Likewise, in a social order that ascribes normalcy to heterosexuality, the closet helps heterosexuality to present itself with authority. The stability of these arrangements — a clean bedroom free of junk and a normative heterosexuality free of homosexuality — depends on the architectural relation between closet and room.

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2. Second-floor plan for a laborer’s cottage, 1850

3. Bedroom furniture, 1850

the familiar architectural referent. The built-in closet, in turn, petrifies and disseminates, as architectural convention, the kind of subjectivity described by the homosexual closet. The built-in closet concretizes the closet of identity, while the closet of identity literalizes its architectural counterpart.

Despite their overlapping meanings in the present, the two closets bear histories that remain distinct and irreducible. We will take each of these in turn, beginning with the built-in closet and focusing in particular on the clothes closet, even though closets have also been used for storing linens, cleaning supplies, and other provisions. The closet we know today was invented as a new spatial type in America around 1840. For centuries, Europeans and North Americans had stored clothing in furniture; sometimes it hung from wall pegs or hooks. Now, for the first time, a wall cavity was produced for household storage. Briskly disseminated among all social classes, the closet effectively outmoded wardrobe, armoire, and chest. These freestanding, mobile cabinets (which still exist, but without the same primacy) had encased clothing within the precinct of the room. Now, the place of storage was at, or more precisely beyond, the room’s edge.

Armoires, chests, and the like are volumetric objects with unambiguous spatial presence. They display locks or key holes to indicate their hollow interior along the outside surface. Moreover, these cabinets are ornamental objects, often lavished with paint, carving, and inlay. Freestanding, upright, and decorated, they evoke the clothed human body. By contrast, the closet displays itself more surreptitiously. It relies on the spatial effects of the hollow wall to present itself as not quite there.

From the moment of its first appearance, the closet not only concealed its contents, but also (almost) hid itself. Numerous mid-nineteenth-century American “pattern books” treat the closet as an obvious but irrelevant fact of domestic planning. In Cottage Residences, first published in 1842, Andrew Jackson Downing describes the closet as follows:

The universally acknowledged utility of closets renders it unnecessary for us to say anything to direct attention to them under this head. In the principal story, a pantry or closets are a necessary accompaniment to the dining room or living room, but are scarcely required in connection with any of the other apart-
ments. Bedrooms always require at least one closet to each, and more will be found convenient.¹

As spaces that merely accompany fully described rooms, closets are outlined in plan drawings but not otherwise elaborated. This is also the case with Samuel Sloan’s *The Model Architect of 1852*. Although Sloan lavishes attention on myriad aspects of house planning and construction, he mentions closets only in passing to say that they must be “fitted up and fully shelved.”² Their height, ventilation, light, surface treatment, and other spatial qualities are not discussed at all. In these mid-nineteenth-century texts (not to mention constructed domestic space and subsequent architectural historiography), the closet was barely visible.

Concealing the storage of clothes and other possessions, the closet may have served to address a widespread ambivalence about material acquisition and the accumulation of excess wealth. This ambivalence appears clearly in an 1882 lecture by Harriet Beecher:

“The good sense of the great majority of business men — and women — is in favor of enterprise, and of that frugality and economy which shall result in amassing property . . . And yet there exists at the same time in the community . . . a vague sense of the unspirituality of the treasures of this life, and of the dangers that inhere in them, together with some sort of conscience — they know not what — or fear.”³

For Americans of the period, encountering an expanding industrial economy alongside the resurgence of Christian morality, wealth had come to represent both virtue and decadence. It could be amassed but not comfortably shown. In this context, it seems, Americans looked to the closet to moderate display without diminishing actual possession.

The closet worked, along with other architectural strategies, to advance an extensive reform movement that aimed to invest the American home with signs of moral propriety. Increasingly strict codes of behavior were given architectural form as, for instance, the stairway to second-floor bedrooms moved out of the entrance hall to a less prominent position. Likewise, programs and spaces once joined were separated into discrete rooms with distinct degrees of privacy. At a wide range of architectural scales, efforts mounted to moderate the visibility of spaces now deemed private. Downing proposed that “the ideal” of domestic planning was to keep “each department of the house . . . complete in itself, and intruding itself but little on the attention of the family or guests when not required to be visible.”⁴ Consistent with other transformations of the American house, in a relatively small but powerful way, the closet helped people to put things away without getting rid of them.

Holding clothes in abeyance, the closet not only hid “excess” in general terms, but, more specifically, the sartorial multiplicity of the wardrobe. If a person’s various garments offer a kind of repertory for self-representation, the closet served to ensure, instead, that only those garments worn at any particular moment would be visible. In this way, one’s outfit could gain singular legitimacy, unchallenged by the other clothes tucked away in the wall. The closet contained the overflow of garments and their meanings to heed Downing’s maxim, a statement that neatly captures the spatial thrust of the era: “The great secret of safe and comfortable living lies in keeping yourself and everything about you in the right place.”⁵

In the course of the last century and a half, the architecture of the closet has sustained a particularly strict relation between closet and room. Regardless of adjacent conditions, the closet usually opens to a single room — a room it is said to be “in” — even though it is actually next to this room or between one room and another. In general, closets receive neither anterior nor lateral expression. Windows or doors rarely appear at the rear or side of the closet, even though they might serve to admit light and air as well as passage.⁶ A relationship of faithful codependence thus emerges between closet and room. The room relies exclusively on its closet and the closet communicates uniquely with its room.

The threshold between closet and room mediates their relation, simultaneously connecting and dissociating the two spaces. Although the closet door may take many forms (among them, sliding, pocket, and hinged single or double doors), the door always shuts to conceal the interior of the closet and opens to allow access. Moreover, the door is usually articulated to minimize its own visibility, often set
flush or painted to match the surrounding wall. As much as possible, the closet presents itself as an absence, a part of the (not so) solid wall at the room’s edge. According to a domestic planning manual from the 1940s: “Closets should not interfere with main areas of activity in a house. They should be accessible but inconspicuous.”

The tension between visual concealment and physical access has driven the architectural elaboration of the closet/room pair. But, despite its formidable architectural strength, it fails to contain the tension exerted by contrary imperatives: storage versus display, keeping things hidden versus keeping things handy. The closet, in the end, can only be so inconspicuous. The door cannot help but hint at the space beyond its planar surface. There is always some seam, gap, hinge, knob, or pull that reveals the door as a mobile element and the wall as a permeable boundary. Furthermore, the door displays the presence of the closet beyond by setting parameters for decorating and furnishing the room. One does not, for example, place furniture in front of a closet door as though it were part of the wall.

Holding things at the edge of the room, at once concealing and revealing its interior, the closet becomes a carrier of abjection, a site of interior exclusion for that which has been deemed dirty. Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic and sociocultural analysis of abjection examines how things that are considered dirty and therefore subject to exclusion are never fully eliminated. Rather, they are deposited just beyond the space they simultaneously soil and cleanse. This partial elimination, this spatial juxtaposition, keeps present that which has been deemed dirty so it can constitute, by contrast, the cleanliness of the clean.

It is with this in mind that we can understand the peculiar architecture of the closet/room pair, along with its urgency for mid-nineteenth-century Americans and its continuing presence. Closet and room work together to keep the room...
clean and the closet messy, to keep the contents of the room proper and those of the closet abject. They do not eliminate dirt, but hide it in plain sight across a boundary that is also a threshold, a doorway that undermines their separation while stabilizing their difference.

The closet of sexual secrecy, named after the built-in closet, existed long before it was first called “the closet.” For at least a century, as Eve Sedgwick, D. A. Miller, and others have demonstrated, the closet was a social and literary convention that narrated homosexuality as a spectacle of veiled disclosure. The closet was the late-nineteenth-century device by which “the love that dare not speak its name” could be spoken and vilified. It served a larger social project committed, as Michel Foucault has shown, to establishing homo- and heterosexuality as distinct and unequal categories of identity. Instead of polymorphic sexual practices, there was now a taxonomy of new sexual types. In Foucault’s account, “the sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.”

The closet organized homosexual identity as an open secret, a telling silence. Like the wall seams and door pulls that betray the closet, the absence of wedding bands and other positive assertions of heterosexuality would effectively raise the specter of gay identity even without forthright disclosure. One could neither be fully legible nor fully invisible as homosexual; instead, secrecy would reveal a condition not otherwise stated. “Heterosexuality” cast its abject other into the (yet-unnamed) closet, at once nearby and far-off, hidden and accessible. Positioned in this way, the category of homosexuality accrued all the fantasmatic impropriety required by heterosexuality to secure its own proper domain, the idealized sanctity of its own, tidy bedroom. Excluded, but always just over there, homosexuality was identified with promiscuity and degeneracy. By contrast, heterosexuality was identified with procreation, fidelity, and true love.

Despite its presence throughout the early part of this century, the homosexual closet was not named as such before the 1960s. The term “closet,” in this sense, arose in America during the period of political foment that pro-
duced, among other events, the Stonewall riots of June 1969. The nascent gay rights movements identified the closet as a tool of homophobic violence and advanced a new battle cry: “Out of the closets! Into the streets!”

From then on, “coming out” has been understood as the origin of gay identity, the sine qua non of physical security, legal protection, and social dignity. “Coming out” is imagined, rather naively, as a way of rejecting the closet and its hold on gay self-representation. And, indeed, within the regime of (almost) compulsory heterosexuality, the personal and political value of coming out must not be underestimated. But its effects on the architecture of the closet should not be overstated. Where heterosexuality is presumed, coming out can never be accomplished once and for all. As Sedgwick has argued, the sustenance of gay identity (where straight identity is presumed) depends on continuous acts of declaration. To reveal gay identity in one situation does not obviate the need to reveal it again in the next. Every new acquaintance, every new situation demands a repetition of, or retreat from, disclosure.

For the past century, then, imagining an opposition of “in” and “out,” gay identity has found itself in a double bind. Wherever one is, relative to the closet, one risks both exposure and erasure. But the binary logic of the closet/room pair, the rigid opposition of in and out, does not account for the dynamic entanglement of these spaces, the ways in which they constantly separate and reattach, the ways in which one is always both in and out, neither in nor out. This binary obsession has radically constricted the ways that gay people feel they can “disclose,” rather than perform, identity.

To come out and declare “I am gay” — whether to another person or to oneself — is to submit to a host of ideological imperatives: self-unity (“I”); immutability over time (“am”); and the given characterization (“gay”). These are crude and brittle words, unable to capture the diachronicity and multivalence of identity and sexuality as played out in social space. Performer k. d. lang seemed aware of this when, shortly after coming out in the national media, she appeared on the Radio City Music Hall stage, took the mike, and gingerly teased her audience: “I ... AM ...... (by now, soap bubbles had begun to fill the stage) ... A ...... LLL . . . L . . . . LL . . . . LLLL . . . . LLL . . . LLLLLL . . . Lawrence Welk fan.”

Gay people have learned to work with and against the closet, since its invention more than a century ago. Toying with the architecture of the closet and its codes of disclosure, k. d. points toward the possibility of manipulating language — verbal and sartorial codes alike — to elaborate “identity” as a lively, ongoing process of signification. This is something Mikhail Bakhtin theorized in his model of language as a site of social contest. The word, for Bakhtin, becomes “one’s own” only when the speaker populates it with his or her own accent and adapts it to his or her own semantic intention. Consider, then, the reinvention of the once derogatory “queer,” “fag,” and “dyke” as affirmative terms. Or the practice, widespread among gay men during the 1970s, of displaying a colored handkerchief in the rear jeans pocket. Appropriated from the uniform of laborers, the handkerchief served not only to display sexual orientation but also to indicate, with considerable nuance, particular sexual interests. Extending from the inside of the pocket to the outside of the trousers, the handkerchief also recapitulated, at the scale of the body, the larger spatial relation governing the storage and display of gay identity.

In recent years, gay people have learned to rearticulate other, more overtly homophobic codes of dress: (macho) tattoos, (Nazi) pink triangle, (gym teacher) hooded sweatshirt, (military) crew cut, (femme fatale) lipstick, and (skinhead) Doc Marten boots. These gestures of détournement — when done well, and before they ossify into new norms — underscore the relation of homo- and heterosexualities without necessarily adopting the violence and inequity of their opposition. They are simultaneously effects of the closet and moments of its loosening.

The impressive architectural stability of the closet notwithstanding, it did not always, and need not, describe a spatiality so rigid. A wide range of spatial practices, including architectural scholarship and design, offer opportunities to redress, provoke, and reconfigure the relation of closet and room. Working with and against the closure of the closet,
it is possible to produce an expanded space between closet and room. Here, in this realm marked by the interpenetration of dirty and clean, of storage and display, new architectures of “identity” may emerge.

Long before the built-in closet was invented, there was another kind of closet, a very different kind of space. From the late fourteenth through the nineteenth centuries, the closet referred, in terms both architectural and social, to an inhabitable room. In England and much of continental Europe, the “closet” (or its analogue, such as the French grand cabinet) described a place for retreat, prayer, study, or speculation. It served not only as a private sanctuary, but also as a special repository for both storage and display of books, paintings, and other treasured objects.

During the fifteenth century in England, a closet particular to royal residences emerged. Closely associated with the private apartments of the sovereign or other nobility, this closet referred to a chamber used for retreat, writing, contemplation, small receptions, and religious activities. At Hampton Court, “holy-day closets” were added in 1536 to provide the king, queen, and their invited guests with semi-private spaces of worship apart from the court. Eventually, “closet” came to refer to the pew occupied by a lord and his family in the chapel of a castle. Through its various incarnations, the royal closet provided privacy, but also allowed for gathering and interaction with others.

An intimate retreat, a space for gathering, a wall cavity used for storage, a condition of gay secrecy: in what ways can the “closet” continue to unfold, opening itself to other spatial forms, uses, and meanings? Consider this: extending from the inside of the closet door frame to some distance in front of the closet, there is an interstitial space that appears, disappears, and reappears again and again. Where the door slides or folds, the space is not so deep but, in the case of the ordinary hinged door, it is a space of considerable dimension. This is a space I call the ante-closet, the space before the closet. The ante-closet is where one selects clothes. It is the space of changing.

I recall my discovery of the ante-closet when I was a young boy. There, standing before a built-in closet, I learned something about my own representational range. To be frank, this did not happen in front of my own closet, not the closet filled with the clothes little boys wore in New Jersey in the late 1960s. Instead, it was in my parents’ room, in-between the hinged doors to my mother’s closet, that I first found and learned to occupy this important little space.

On the inside surface of both doors was a tall mirror lit by delicate, vertically mounted fluorescent tubes. I remember pushing the switch as the lights flickered and hummed, then positioning the doors so the mirrors reflected space, and me, to infinity. Before removing my own clothing, I carefully selected an outfit from my mother’s wardrobe — dress, shoes, necklace, handbag. The transformation was brief and private, as I never chose to display my new look to others. But it was a privacy that was profoundly limitless, a moment where self and other became completely entangled. The paired mirrors redoubled every gesture to infinity as I saw myself, in a moment of utter plenitude, transformed: grown-up, autonomous, and lovely.

Nowadays, despite my more gender-consonant wardrobe, I continue to extend my representational range in the ante-closet. Between the closet and the room, in this ephemeral space, I explore the effects of sartorial gestures and imagine their significance to others. Respectable merino cardigan? Raw leather tunic? Mao jacket? Velour cigarette pants? Where the ante-closet contains a mirror, I am able to consider these modes of identification visually, as others might see them. Where there is no mirror, I rely instead on memory and imagination. Private and social realms interpenetrate as the line between what I hide and what I show breaks down and I start to see myself as someone else.

The ante-closet can be further elaborated with reference to Gilles Deleuze’s notion of the pli or fold. The pli is a space that emerges, both within and against social relations, to constitute a space of self-representation at once connected to and free from social norms. In the pli, Deleuze writes, “the relation to oneself assumes an independent status. It is as if the relations of the outside, folded back to create a doubling, allow a relation to oneself to emerge, and constitute an inside which is hollowed out and develops its own unique dimen-
9. Chuck Nanney, unique color prints, 1992
We can imagine many ways of elaborating the ante-closet. The ante-closet has a curious status in architectural drawings, conventionally rendered as a kind of graphic interruption. The notation for “door swing” is an arc that traces the passage of the unhinged edge from open to shut. Whether drawn as a light solid line or a series of dashed segments, this arc does not indicate, as other lines do, “cut” material. Instead, it records the possibility of architectural movement, of changing spatial relations. At once conventional and incredibly bizarre, a moment of graphic folding, the notation for “door swing” registers the making and unmaking of architectural space.

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We can imagine many ways of elaborating the ante-closet. Apertures that open the closet to other spaces; closet fixtures that leap into rooms; doors that evoke the closet interior at its surface: these are among the many possibilities open to further architectural research. In thinking about my childhood encounter, I have observed that one way the ante-closet enriches the relation of storage and display is by invoking a play of scales — from the bodily to the infinite — and by inviting acts of architectural manipulation: sliding, pressing, adjusting, grabbing.

Like tattoos and hooded sweatshirts, like the terms “queer,” “fag,” and “dyke,” the ante-closet is an effect of reappropriations and resignifications without end. It resists the violence of fixed identities by allowing spaces to fold, unfold, and fold again. The ante-closet does not obliterates closet or room, but brings them into a more fluid and generous adjacency. It waits between these spaces, ready to burst when relations of affiliation and abjection need to be refigured. Working with and against closet and room, the ante-closet dismantles their tired architecture to sustain the possibility of other arrangements.

Notes
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4. Downing, Cottage Residences, 3.
6. An American house planning guide from 1940 notes: “Ventilation of the clothes closet generally waits for the opening of the door into the bedroom. . . . Daylight, particularly sunlight, is valuable as a sterilizer, but we seldom manage to admit it to the closet” (Wooster Bard Field, House Planning [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1940], 149).
10. Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978), 43. He further writes: “This new persecution of the peripheral sexualities entailed an incorporation of perversions and a new specification of individuals. As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject for them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indirect anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality” (42–43).
11. “Homosexuality, in a word, becomes the excluded; it stands in for, paradoxically, that which stands without. But the binary structure of sexual orientation, fundamentally a structure of exclusion and exteriorization, nonetheless constructs that exclusion by prominently including the contaminated other in its oppositional logic. The homo in relation to the hetero, much like the feminine in relation to the masculine, operates as an indispensable interior exclusion — an outside which is inside interiority making the articulation of the latter possible, a transgression of the border which is necessary to constitute the border as such” (Diana F.不含
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12. “Furthermore, the deadly elasticity of heterosexist presumption means that, like Wendy in Peter Pan, people find new walls springing up around them even as they drowse: every encounter with a new classful of students, to say nothing of a new boss, social worker, loan officer, landlord, doctor, erects new closets whose fraught and characteristic laws of optics and physics exact from at least gay people new surveys, new calculations, new draughts and requisitions of secrecy or disclosure” (Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet, 68).

13. Judith Butler asks: “Is the ‘subject’ who is ‘out’ free of its subjection and finally in the clear? Or could it be that the subjection that subjectivates the gay or lesbian subject in some ways continues to oppress, or oppresses most insidiously, once ‘outness’ is claimed? What or who is it that is ‘out,’ made manifest and fully disclosed, when and if I reveal myself as lesbian? What is the very linguistic act that offers up the promise of a transparent revelation of sexuality? Can sexuality even remain sexuality once it submits to a criterion of transparency and disclosure, or does it perhaps cease to be sexuality precisely when the semblance of full explicitness is achieved?” (Imitation and Gender Subordination,” in Fuss, inside/out, 15).

14. Michael Holquist, ed., The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981). Bakhtin writes: “As a living, socio-ideological concrete thing, as heteroglot opinion, language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes ‘one’s own’ only when the speaker populates it with his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation . . . it exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one’s own” (293–94).

15. Oxford English Dictionary, 2d ed., s.v. “closet.” A text from 1374 notes: “In a closet for to avyse her bette, She went alone.” A novel of 1566 states: “We doe call the most secret place in the house appropiate unto our owne private studies . . . a Closet.”

16. Ibid. According to a text from 1625: “If the Queens Closet where they now say masse were not large enough, let them have it in the Great Chamber.”


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5. Photograph courtesy of the Institute for the Prevention of Design.