

# Writing and Building Queer Space Theory: A Layered Definition

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**Definitions of “queer” vary greatly, from activist to theoretical to mainstream discourses. In turn, architectural theorists, historians, and practitioners have used “queer space” to discuss both political challenges to architectural education and disciplinary knowledge and aesthetic challenges to formal conventions. Furthermore, as built examples of queer approaches to design have been very limited, writing has stayed a major mode of expression of queer thinking in architecture. This paper explores how different queer space theorists have used writing, linking essays and exhibitions, performances, and built spaces to understand the tensions between different understandings of “queer space” since their emergence in the 1980s.**

**The paper focuses on untangling how theorists and practitioners link ethics and aesthetics, queer political activism and queer theory, through their writing methods, highlighting, challenging or reinforcing (and sometimes all at the same time) the relation between these different modes of action, between formal and social critiques. Building on the idea that challenges to traditional forms of designing or writing highlight the social normativity of those forms, many have sought to propose new ways of thinking about how one experiences space. However, in writing as in designing, balancing the formal and social critiques brings tension. I argue here for a renewed focus on identifying the objectives behind queer modes of writing in architecture in order to assess their limits and, by extension, more productively use those limits.**

No space is totally queer or completely unqueerable [...]. Queer space is imminent: queer space is space in the process of, literally, taking place, of claiming territory.

—Christopher Reed, “Imminent Domain: Queer Space in the Built Environment”<sup>1</sup>

Definitions of “queer” vary greatly, from activist to theoretical to mainstream discourses. In turn, architectural theorists, historians, and practitioners have used “queer space” to discuss both aesthetic challenges to formal conventions and political challenges to disciplinary knowledge, architectural practice, and design education. These understandings have included

both calls to make visible queer figures and attempts to reimagine space as layered networks of interpersonal relations shaped by the materiality of buildings and cities, as the quote by Reed above underlines.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, as built examples of queer approaches to design have been very limited, writing has stayed a major mode of expression for queer thinking in architecture. This paper explores how different queer space theorists have used writing to further their objectives, surveying and linking essays and exhibitions, performances, and built spaces to understand the intersections between different understandings of “queer space” since their emergence in the 1980s.

The paper focuses on untangling how theorists and practitioners link ethics and aesthetics, queer political activism and queer theory, through their writing methods, highlighting, challenging or reinforcing (and sometimes all at the same time) the relation between these different modes of action, between formal and social critiques. Building on the idea that challenges to traditional forms of designing or writing highlight the social normativity of those forms, many have sought to propose new ways of thinking about how one experiences space. However, in writing as in designing, balancing the formal and social critiques is sometimes challenging and one risks diminishing allied, but different, points of view while trying too forcefully to make a point. I thus argue here for a renewed focus on identifying the objectives behind queer modes of writing in architecture in order to assess their limits and, by extension, more productively use those limits. The objective is not necessarily to oppose discourses and modes of writing or to frame some approaches as more successful than others, but rather to present some of the questions – and frustrations – that comes from studying these texts and projects, in their sometimes disconnection from everyday struggles that should be at the center of architectural thinking.

## DEFINING QUEERNESS IN ARCHITECTURE: FRAMING GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

The late 1980s and early 1990s saw a first wave of thinking and writing about the idea of queer space in architecture, in the context of the AIDS epidemics and tense relations between sexual and gender minorities and governmental institutions that framed the development of queer activism by groups like ACT UP and Queer Nation and the parallel emergence of queer

theory in academic circles. In architecture, much of the early experimentations with queer space thinking came from an understanding of architecture and the city based in continental philosophy, psychoanalysis, and critical theory, the same sources that sustained the emergence of queer theory, but that were also associated in architecture with the autonomy project. For example, Mark Robbins, who early in his career gained experience in the Peter Eisenman-led Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies<sup>3</sup>, was one of the first architects to explicitly associate in his work an eroticized male body with representations of architecture, challenging the association and use of feminine bodies by architects.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the oft-cited *Sexuality & Space* edited by Beatriz Colomina, heavily relies on psychoanalytic readings of architectural spaces and representations (for example in the numerous references made to the phallic shape of skyscrapers).<sup>5</sup> If often celebrated as one of the first edited collection about sexuality and its relation to architecture, most chapters rely on an essentialist and binary reading of gender and sexuality that does not acknowledge the challenges made by contemporaneous queer theorists to gender and sex categories, limiting its potential for the development of a queer understanding of architecture. However, the context of the book is interesting, as it stems from an event held at the Princeton School of Architecture, where in the following years much explicitly queer work would be developed by students or faculty, for example in the work of Joel Sanders,<sup>6</sup> in the theoretical explorations of art historian John Paul Ricco,<sup>7</sup> in the early work of Jürgen Mayer H, or in the exploration of the closet by Henry Urbach.<sup>8</sup>

The Princeton connection also extends to the *Queer Space* exhibition at the Storefront for Art and Architecture in New York, held in 1994 to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots and curated by Beatriz Colomina, Dennis Dollens, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Cindi Patton, Henry Urbach and Mark Wigley. As an exhibition, this event might not be the best example to look for queer space writing, but the few texts in its poster/catalog still illuminate the importance of writing for its curators (Figure 1). Among them, the call for “Queer Space Manifesto/Proposals” authored by Sedgwick, a pioneering queer theorist, begins with an italicized text:

Flaming through outer space? Or cruising your inner child?  
ACTing UP, going down, carrying on.

Hang around, come across, put out, jerk off, log on, boogie down, work through, fashion forward, lay back.

Safety. Danger. Uptown. Downtown. Ask. Tell.

Where are the traces of all our queer ancestors? Where did they arrive, shelter, display, disport, depart?

Melvin Dixon says: “I’ll be somewhere listening for my name.”

Vows and disavowals. Trade, betrayal, tradition. Erasures – racisms – races, Laborors, labors: loafing, and luxuries, and loveliness. A homeless person’s “right to privacy” – where does it live? Younger and older; effeminate/femme/feminine/masculine/butch. Commotions, emotions, movements.

Dignity/ pride/exhibitionism/shyness/shame/attitude/  
public displays of affection.

### “All the rage”

When is a march a parade a demonstration?

The dictionary says: “**Queer** from German **quer** (oblique, cross, adverse).”<sup>9</sup>

The play with written form clearly visible in this call sets up the objectives of the curators. Sedgwick – and by extension the other curators – continue with the questions “What makes space queer? How to give queer space a history and a future, a powerful presence?” The curating team thus positions their understanding of queer space in architecture as being directly tied to a tradition of manifestos, or written proposals to rethink and reframe how we design. In another introductory essay, Colomina, Dollens, Sedgwick Urbach and Wigley similarly ask “And likewise, with “space”: do we mean physical space? Or do we mean the space of discursive practices, texts, codes of behavior and regulatory norms that organize social life?”<sup>10</sup> For the curators, the catalog texts combine with the installations to contest definitions of queerness that “regulates” it by “either exclude[ing] it from a space or includ[ing] it within it” and to suggest “new alliances between architects, artists, activists and cultural critics.”<sup>11</sup> This framing allows the different artists, historians, geographers and architects who participated to use a variety of approaches that echo different understandings of queer spaces. Many projects are about making visible the use of public and private spaces by queer people, both historically and contemporaneously, with text often being an integral part of the project. For example, the historians-led “Queer Spaces” by Repohistory added commemorative signs throughout Manhattan highlighting LGBTQ people or events. Another example, Mark Robbins and Benjamin Gianni’s “Who We Are and How We Live,” seeks to challenge common assumptions about spatial decisions from gay and lesbian people by presenting photos and texts about houses inhabited by gay and lesbian people in Columbus, Ohio, and Ottawa, Ontario. The text accompanying the project in a later publication in *Architecture of the Everyday* explains that the project seeks to show that most spaces used by queer people are hidden throughout ordinary landscapes, that they are a layer among normative symbols of domesticity associated with urban, suburban and non-urban environments.<sup>12</sup> The two projects underline the layering of text and space to achieve a definition of queer space that supports the ethical

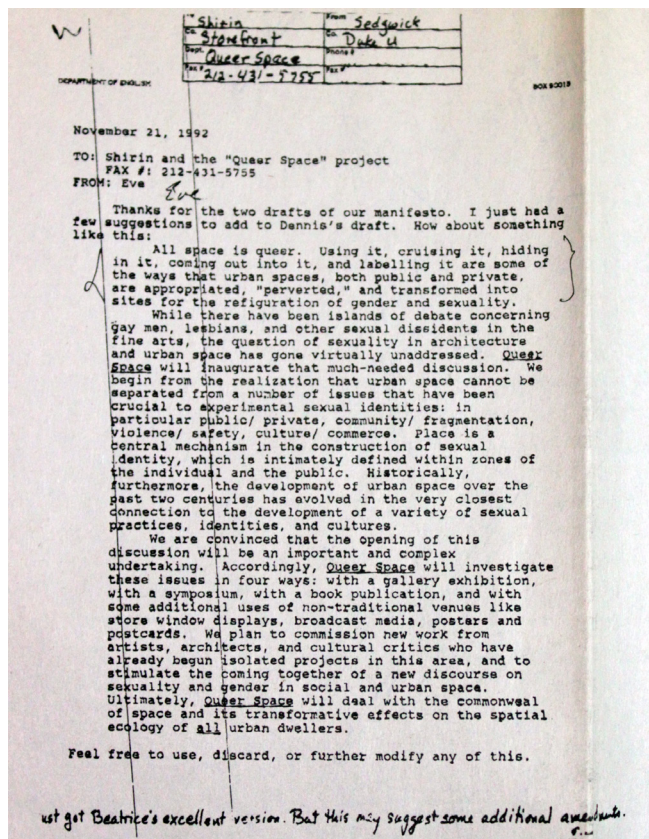


Figure 1. Drafting of the "Queer Space" manifesto, from the exhibition catalogue for *Queer Space*, 1994. Credit: Storefront for Art and Architecture.

project of both, to contest an understanding of space as being either queer or not.

Different approaches to writing queer space are also visible in two books from 1997, both seen as essential early contributions to the field, architectural critic and educator Aaron Betsky's *Queer Space: Architecture and Same-Sex Desire* and the edited collection *Queers in Space: Communities | Public Places | Sites of Resistance*. Betsky's *Queer Space* follows his *Building Sex: Men, Women, and the Construction of Sexuality* from two years earlier.<sup>13</sup> Both books take an historical approach that seeks to make visible marginalized examples from the past or to reclaim canonical figures – mostly men – whose sexuality has previously been ignored, as well as to challenge the gendered construction of the disciplines of architecture and interior design. This positions his work in a trend of architectural research on "queer space" aligned with an understanding of queer spaces as being specifically gay or lesbian space outside of heteronormative space. This is present in many discussions of houses by non-heterosexual architects, such as Philip Johnson or Paul Rudolph, or for non-heterosexual clients,<sup>14</sup> something Betsky does in his focus on specific figures. In *Queer Space*, bringing his argument to the 1990s, Betsky celebrates anonymous gay male cruising spaces

such as bathhouses that at the time were being targeted as vectors in the spread of the AIDS pandemics. Betsky's writing here merges the historical and ethnographic experience, framing a definition of queer space that alternates between its association with non-heterosexual figures and the aesthetic and sensorial experience of space.

The collection *Queers in Space: Communities | Public Places | Sites of Resistance*, edited by Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, and Yolanda Retter, takes a different approach.<sup>15</sup> Writing from landscape, planning, and urban and social geography lenses, the diverse contributors present a much broader range of people and experiences. Gay men are discussed, but the book also importantly takes into account in a more balanced way lesbian and bisexual women. Trans and non-binary people are still barely discussed, but the book offers more nuanced understandings of gender that shows a focus on a different kind of visibility. Whereas the discussion of queer space by Betsky often focuses on an understanding of queer space as being used specifically by queer people, the title of *Queers in Space* underlines the different focus of the edited collection, the attempt to understand the layered use and experience of space where queer and non-queer people coexist in space and resistances, tensions, and transformations frame the definition of queer space.

Despite their differences, both books played an important role in calling to attention the need to think about the relation of gender, sexuality, and the built environment, without however attempting to layer the projective and the written as the Queer Space exhibition did. Unfortunately, these initiatives were the first but also in some ways the last to develop in this initial wave of queer space theory. The next two decades saw only a few publications, with the topic almost completely disappearing from architectural history and theory. Furthermore, the few publications that emerged, such as Ricco's transformation of his PhD dissertation into a book published in 2002, were often based on research dating back to this early wave.<sup>16</sup> This did not happen only for queer studies, as feminist or critical race studies of architecture and design were also kept to the margins of architectural discourses and practices, despite efforts in the previous decades to show the importance of these discussions to challenge the discipline.<sup>17</sup> This unfortunately means that while other disciplines were refining and developing sophisticated understandings of gender and sexuality, architecture and design were still stuck in an overwhelmingly white cis male and able-bodied paradigm.

## EXPANDING THE DEFINITION

Over the last few years, queer space theory has made a comeback in both academic and mainstream architectural publications, with some of it obviously building on work developed over the previous decade, but which had yet to reach a broader audience. These publications are examples of a return to social and human issues in architecture that have mirrored

# Log

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Rock Rabbit Lookout, Payette National Forest, Idaho.	
Photo: Matt Bowers. Courtesy the United States Forest Service.	

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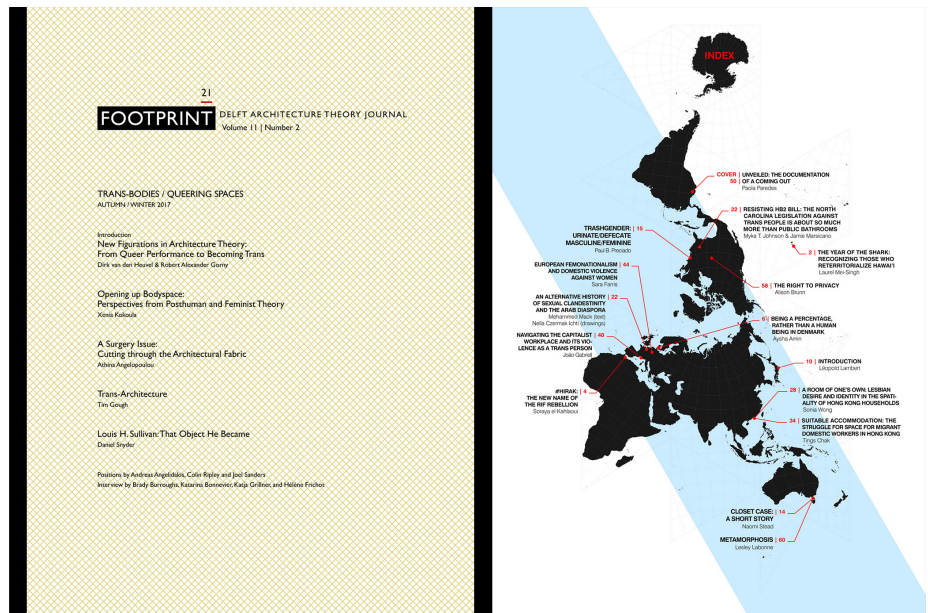


Figure 2. Tables of contents of *Log* issue 41 (fall 2017), *Footprint* volume 11 number 2 (2017) and *The Funambulist* issue 13 (Sept.-Oct. 2017).

broader societal discussions around movements like metoo or Black Live Matters, or in the case of LGBTQ issues, debates around marriage or the use of public restrooms. Like the 1990s wave of queer space thinking, this new phase is also coming from different impulses, but importantly generally seeks to include a more diverse group of people beyond the gay men that overwhelmingly populated the 1990s interpretation of queer space.

Some of these publications are once again coming from a more theory-heavy academic context. For example, *Log*, a magazine with strong links to elite academic institutions, published a special issue guest-edited by Jaffer Kolb in 2017 under the theme “Working Queer.”<sup>18</sup> The issue included a range of approaches (Figure 2), from an interview with Betsky discussing the impact of his book,<sup>19</sup> to a discussion of a project by Andrés Jaque focused on how queer refugees navigate space through the use of digital media, to highly speculative formal written experiments such as “2,497 Words: Provincialism, Critical or Otherwise” by Michael Meredith, a reflection on discourse and writing, or “Noncon Form” by Annie Barrett, an attempt to queer Gordon Matta-Clark’s, Herzog & de Meuron’s or OMA’s work.<sup>20</sup> Joel Sanders’s first-person narrative about thinking about the struggles of trans and non-binary people<sup>21</sup> is one of the only articles to explicitly focus on the everyday experience of architecture.

The academic journal *Footprint* also published a special issue in 2017, “Trans-Bodies / Queering Spaces.”<sup>22</sup> Based in Delft, Netherlands, the issue exemplifies both the broader geographical diversity of current queer space thinking – away from the North American focus of the 1990s – and a shift to the experience of trans people (Figure 2). This visibility

of trans people begun a few years earlier. For example, philosopher and curator Paul B. Preciado published in *Log* a Foucault-inspired discussion of the relation of trans bodies and architecture and has continued to explore how the body and gender intersect with architectural spaces and representations.<sup>23</sup> The spatial activist magazine *The Funambulist*, led by Léopold Lambert, also published a special issue in 2017, under the theme “Queers, Feminists & Interiors,” that showed geographical diversity and a focus on trans experiences, but did so with a much more politically involved exploration of everyday lives and spaces (Figure 2).<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Canadian poet and scholar Lucas Crawford has worked on the development of a “trans theory” of architecture. He presents his exploration of Diller Scofidio + Renfro’s work on projects like the Brasserie or the High Line as a personal narrative that underlines the highly subjective experience of space that much queer theory highlights, merging form and content in publications such as a 2016 book based on his PhD dissertation and a 2018 poetry book.<sup>25</sup> Echoing other discussions on representation, this focus on trans people also often comes from cis people. For example, “From Stud to Stalled! Architecture in Transition” in the *Log* issue discussed above, presents cis male architect Joel Sanders’s personal shift in thinking about sexuality and gender as the basis for his Stalled! initiative, developed with trans historian Susan Stryker and legal scholar Terry Kogan to rethink public restrooms to be more inclusive of trans and non-binary people.<sup>26</sup>

Writing focused on designing more inclusive public restrooms are exemplary of another stream of queer space writing that is focused on rethinking the everyday experience of space to include gender and sexuality as a design factor. This expands 1990s efforts to make visible queer people to highlight the

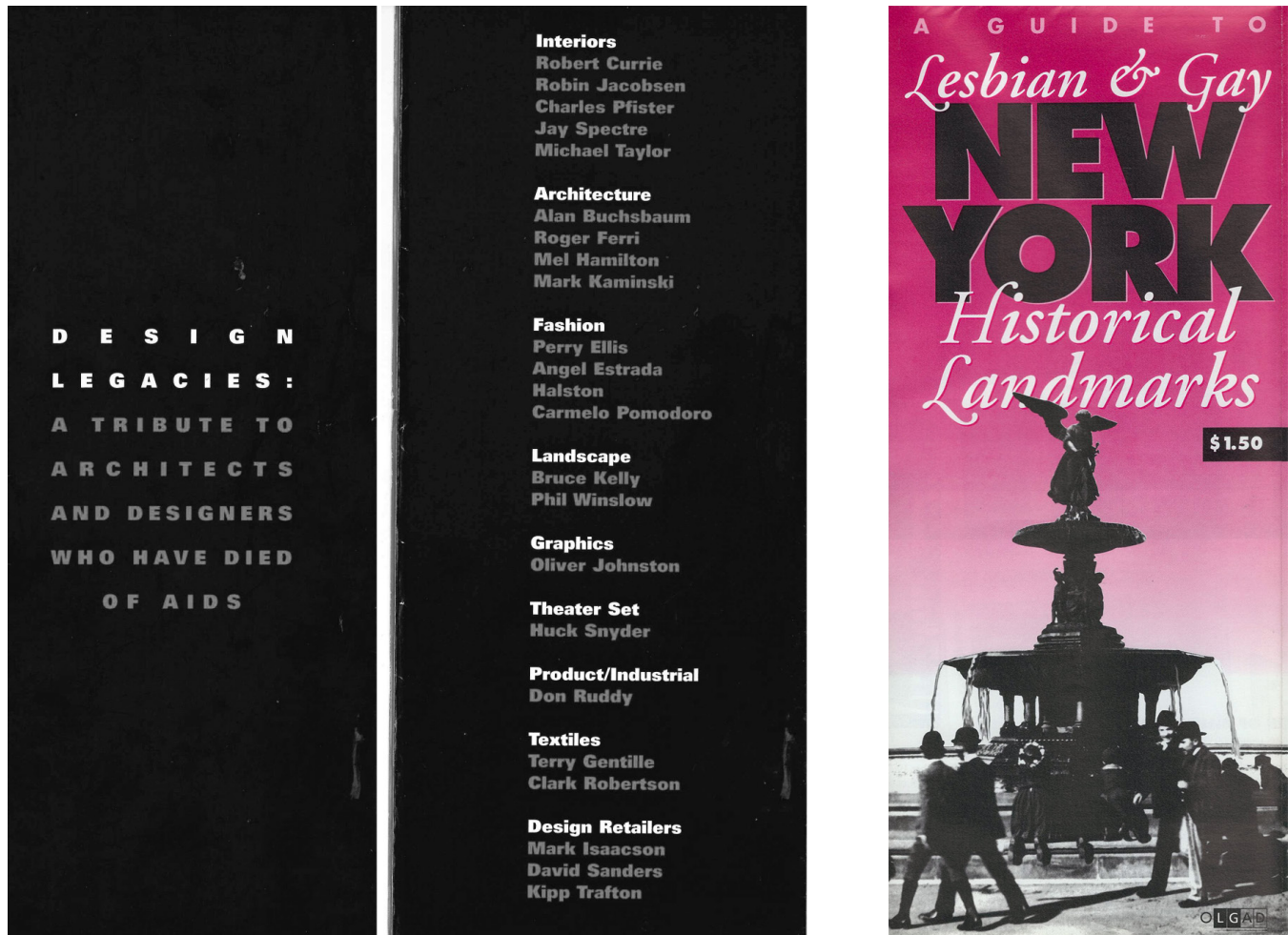


Figure 3. *Design Legacies: A Tribute to Architects and Designers Who Have Died of AIDS* and *A Guide to Lesbian & Gay New York Historical Landmarks*, both published for Design Pride in New York City, 1994. Credit: Organization of Lesbian and Gay Architects and Designers.

importance of acknowledging their existence and their needs. For example, the Organization of Lesbian and Gay Architects and Designers, founded in 1991, organized a Design Pride in New York City in 1994 that led to the design of *A Guide to Lesbian & Gay New York Historical Landmarks*, a foldout historical map, as well as an exhibition and booklet celebrating the legacy of designers who had died of AIDS (Figure 3).<sup>27</sup> These initiatives show the focus of the organization: far from being about identifying a queer theory of space and architecture, they are about making visible the contribution of gay and lesbian architects and designers (note the absence of bisexual or trans people), about offering role models and eventually breaking some of the assumptions about queer designers. The map eventually led to the development of the New York City LGBT Historic Sites Project<sup>28</sup> and a 2018 special issue of the academic journal *Change Over Time* dedicated to LGBTQ heritage.<sup>29</sup> Online media such as The Architectural League of New York's *Urban Omnibus* also developed content about LGBTQ experience that focused on the preservation and management of the built environment,

including issues like rising rents or safe space, far from theoretical discussions of the camp use of color and exaggerated forms developed by others.<sup>30</sup>

Echoing the *Queer Space* exhibition, a few recent initiatives have made a deliberate effort to bring together writing and making, formal and social experimentations. For example, Katarina Bonnevier's PhD dissertation, *Behind Straight Curtains*, from 2007, celebrates the challenges to social norms enacted through spatial interventions by architect Eileen Gray and authors Natalie Barney and Selma Lagerlöf in the early 20th century by developing her own formal interpretation of their work.<sup>31</sup> Bonnevier's reading of their use of space as social enactors brings a queer feminist point of view that is still visible in her current work with MYCKET, a research-intensive art and architecture collective initiated in 2012 with Thérèse Kristiansson and Marian Alves Silva (later joined by Ullis Ohlgren and Anna Märta Danielsson). For Bonnevier and MYCKET, thinking about a queer ethics of space is tied to thinking about the aesthetics of queer space. The collective's

name itself highlights this. MYCKET is a Swedish word that means “much, a lot,” underlining their maximalist approach to queering the rigidity of architecture, their interest in excess as a queer feminist tactic. It builds on feminist graphic designer Sheila Levant de Bretteville:

I will never, never, never forget to include people of color, people of different points of view, people of different genders, people of different sexual preference. [...] People who have given their whole lives to supporting the classicizing aesthetic of modernism feel invalidated when we talk about this necessary inclusiveness, but this diversity and inclusiveness is our only hope. It is not possible to plaster over everything with clean elegance. Dirty architecture, fuzzy theory, and dirty design must also be out there.<sup>32</sup>

Through their focus on aesthetics, they wish to highlight how norms are manifested in spatial and material design, but also to challenge these norms through design, to create reparative spaces rather than paranoid spaces and to avoid being only critical, as proposals for transformations are also important.<sup>33</sup> To think about how to create a society where there is room for everyone, they more specifically build from the tensions they feel within their own embodied experience of practice, as Bonnevier notes:

To do this we need to question the modernist design and research traditions of reduction and specialization, since they exclude bodies and behaviors and build upon competition. By doing this, our own bodies also come into play. For instance, being an architect trained in a modernist tradition, I sense the aesthetic challenge as a torsion in my body when my preferences are turned towards the un-tight and the inconsequent. This triggers me, since it promises escape from the hierarchical logic of good or bad subjects and research methods. [...] In modernist design processes, consequence and discipline are worshipped at the expense of differences.<sup>34</sup>

MYCKET’s research-based practice focuses on the design of performative spaces where personal relations are explored, including the role played by architecture in the experience of intimacy and eroticism, materialized for example in *The Club Scene* series of projects. Designed over thirteen “acts” between 2012 and 2016, *The Club Scene* (Figure 4) restages salons, clubs and other meeting spaces significant for queer and feminist activism. The different acts explore a wide variety of spaces geographically and historically, again paying close attention to discursive impulses and the representation of spaces in archives.<sup>35</sup> Again acknowledging the importance of the layering of writing and space, the queer feminist approach developed by MYCKET was an important part of a special issue of *Architecture and Culture* on “Styles of Queer Feminist Practices and Objects in Architecture.”<sup>36</sup>



Figure 4. MYCKET with Maja Gunn and the New Beauty Council, *The Club Scene of Gothenburg 1980-2013*, “Exclude Me In”, GIBCA 2013. Credit: MYCKET with Maja Gunn and the New Beauty Council.

### CELEBRATING A SPECTRUM OF UNDERSTANDINGS AND APPROACHES

This is by necessity only a brief survey of the growing number of work seeking to explore the potential of queer space thinking to rethink spatial design. While all queer space writing seeks to challenge something, as we could see, different approaches have been taken. While aesthetic or formal experiments can often be used to shine a light on ethical concerns, the balancing act is quite difficult and can sometimes result in debates around the best approach to be taken rather than on a focus on the objective, the need to create a more inclusive built environment. In recent years, however, people like MYCKET have deliberately and explicitly discussed this spectrum of approaches and the relation between the ethics and the aesthetics of architectural discourses and practices. Furthermore, the theory-heavy focus of an overwhelming majority of the writing being done around queer space, as well as the elite academic location of much work, raises questions about who exactly is represented in queer space thinking. However, with the increasing visibility of activist design research, we might be seeing an increased sophistication in how architecture approaches queer issues, building on advances in other disciplines and opening up to the inclusion of a broader range of voices.

### ENDNOTES

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2. In architecture, much of research on “queer space” is aligned with an understanding of queer spaces as specifically gay or lesbian space, private houses for gay or lesbian clients or physical manifestations of “gay communities” outside of heteronormative space. Another approach defines queer space as a space of explicit sexuality, such as gay cruising spaces or bars. A last approach, broadens the field and defines queer space as an imminent space, a space constantly being constructed and redefined in relation to normative space. It calls for thinking outside of a spatial concentration of physical LGBT spaces to instead question heterosexist space across a diversity of spaces. For a more detailed survey of queer discourses in architecture, see Olivier Vallerand, *Unplanned Visitors: Queering the Ethics and Aesthetics of Domestic Space* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2020), 16-23.
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