Politics of the American Domestic Interior

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What are the politics of the American domestic interior? How might designers contribute to more equitable futures through interior residential design? Examining issues of race, gender, culture, health, economics, and climate in the domestic realm—drawing from design theory, oral history, and public health research—this paper emerges from a course that was the first in the department to count toward the institution's social justice minor. The research brings in expanded voices to examine how the design of domestic spaces communicates cultural, social, and economic values.

DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES AND A RANGE OF HOUSEHOLDS

Extending the theories of writers on architecture and culture like Amos Rapaport, who in 1969 wrote that "house form is … the consequence of a whole range of socio-cultural factors seen in their broadest terms."[1] "Politics of the American Domestic Interior" goes beyond nuclear-family households, emphasizing alternative living arrangements and the homes of people in marginalized groups, as well as a diverse set of authors. Incorporating into design education the perspectives of housing advocates and residents reveals the political and personal impacts of domestic architecture, particularly where design intersects with culture and the law. Examples from our course readings demonstrate how these intersections manifest in opportunities to improve residents' lives through design.

In two Queens, New York neighborhoods with high immigrant populations, a survey of 446 homes registered as single-family showed that 80% had signs of basement use, which is typically illegal and often unsafe. An advocacy group estimated that 35% of those could be legalized and made safer through design interventions: "We have advocates, we have legal experts but we don't have enough of the design community involved in the process."[2] Across town, oral histories with residents of New York's Chinatown revealed lived experiences in small residences that felt constrained, countering the contemporary fetishization of tiny homes and micro-units: "We had very little space," remembered one resident. "We had a large bedroom, a small common room, a narrow kitchen, and a bathroom that was almost part of the kitchen."[3]

Historical resources show the centrality of interior domestic design in larger social movements. W.E.B. DuBois focused on racial justice issues associated with the interior in "The Problem of Housing the Negro," writing, "Of itself, truly, the question of physical homes for nine million of our fellows is of no little moment, but it is of greatest interest when we know how closely it is connected with other and pressing questions of health, education and morals."[4] Forty years later, "houser" Elisabeth Coit demonstrated the importance of careful resident engagement, using extensive low-income tenant interviews to develop design guidelines accommodating residents' documented needs, rather than their imagined ones. Where some housing "experts" were frustrated—"they use their kitchen for things they ought to use their living room for"[5] —Coit considered supporting tenants' domestic activities to be her design assignment, creating resident-centered schematics that are still provocative today. Together, these examples show the relevance of interior design in larger political struggles.

THE DEPARTMENT'S FIRST COURSE FOR THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MINOR

Our institution is known for its longstanding commitment to social justice, particularly through efforts related to the planning department. With notable exceptions; however, political issues are typically less prominent in courses on interior design. Working with representatives from the institute's social justice minor, we incorporated in our new course syllabus learning outcomes such as "demonstrate historical and contemporary understandings of the relationship between interior design and social and political change" and "engage in a creative process that is collaborative, interdisciplinary…and grounded in social justice concerns." Reframing the course slightly to meet the minor's requirements helped us to sharpen our existing aims; being listed in the minor helped us to attract students from four different majors.

"Politics of the American Domestic Interior" encourages students to make connections between the most pressing political questions of our time and residential interior design, examining feminist, climate justice, and other diverse perspectives on the spaces where politics play out every day. The semester is organized into seven themes: "What it Takes to Make a Home," "Culture and the Law," "Insider Politics," "Healthy on the Inside," "Interior Influences," "Listening to Residents," and "Family

Figure 1. *Sylvia's Place*. From QSAPP (Queer Students of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation), *Safe Space: Housing LGBTQ Youth Experiencing Homelessness*. New York: Columbia GSAPP, 2019.

Figure 2. *New York ocial workers teaching immigrants how to arrange their homes*. From Bertha Smith, ''The Gospel of Simplicity,'' 81; courtesy The Winterthur Library,Printed Book and Periodical Collection. In Sarah Abigail Leavitt, *Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart : A Cultural History of Domestic Advice*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

Figure 3.*Apartment with many different types of services and rooms but no kitchen.* Image from Anna Puigjaner's "Kitchenless City." lecture in "The Feminist City" public program. Columbia GSAPP, October 2, 2020.

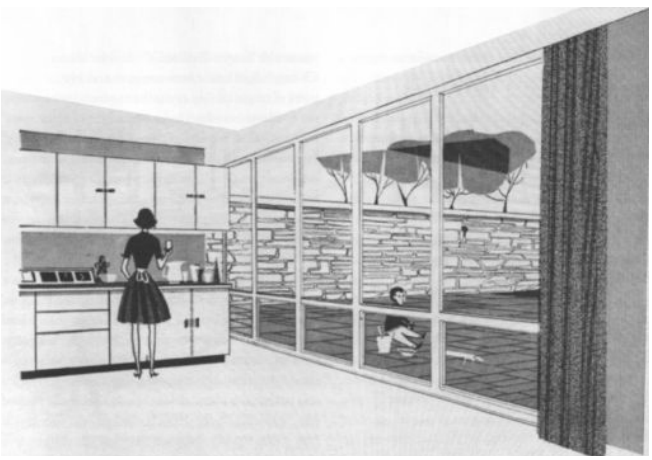

Figure 4. *A child plays on a sterile outdoor patio while his mother works in the sterile kitchen*. From Window Planning Principles, SmallHomes Council Circular Series Index Number Fn.o, University of Illinois Bulletin 52, no. 8 (September 1954). University of Illinois Archives. In Dianne Suzette Harris, *Little White Houses: How the Postwar Home Constructed Race in America*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

Figure 5. *Zhen family apartment in New York City's Chinatown.* From Jerome Chou, "Home." Open City, March 16, 2011.

Figure 6. *Joseph "Udo" Keppler's study.* From *The Papoose*, March 1903. In Elizabeth Hutchinson, "Unpacking the Indian Corner." In The Indian Craze: Primitivism, Modernism, and Transculturation in American Art, 1890-1915. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009.

Figure 7. *Spread from student final pamphlet: "Camouflage of Black American Domestic Interiors.* " Young Ji-Byun.

- There is a sense of temporary residence, as the family is forced to move several times between each internment camp, showing that interior spaces are not their own, despite being residents
- The interior spaces in of themselves are barely habitable for human habitation, only providing the bare necessities at the cost of extreme temperatures and inadequate comforts

George Takei, They Called us Enemy

George Takei, They Called us Enemy

The interior spaces of internment camps themselves reflect the racist policies imprisoning Japanese Americans through its conditions, confinement, and colonial hierarchy domineering over the space altogether

Figure 8. *Slides from student-led reading discussion on Takei, George, Justin Eisinger, Steven Scott, and Harmony Becker.* They Called Us Enemy */ Written by George Takei, Justin Eisinger and; Steven Scott ; Art by Harmony Becker. Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions, 2019.* Walker Meyn.

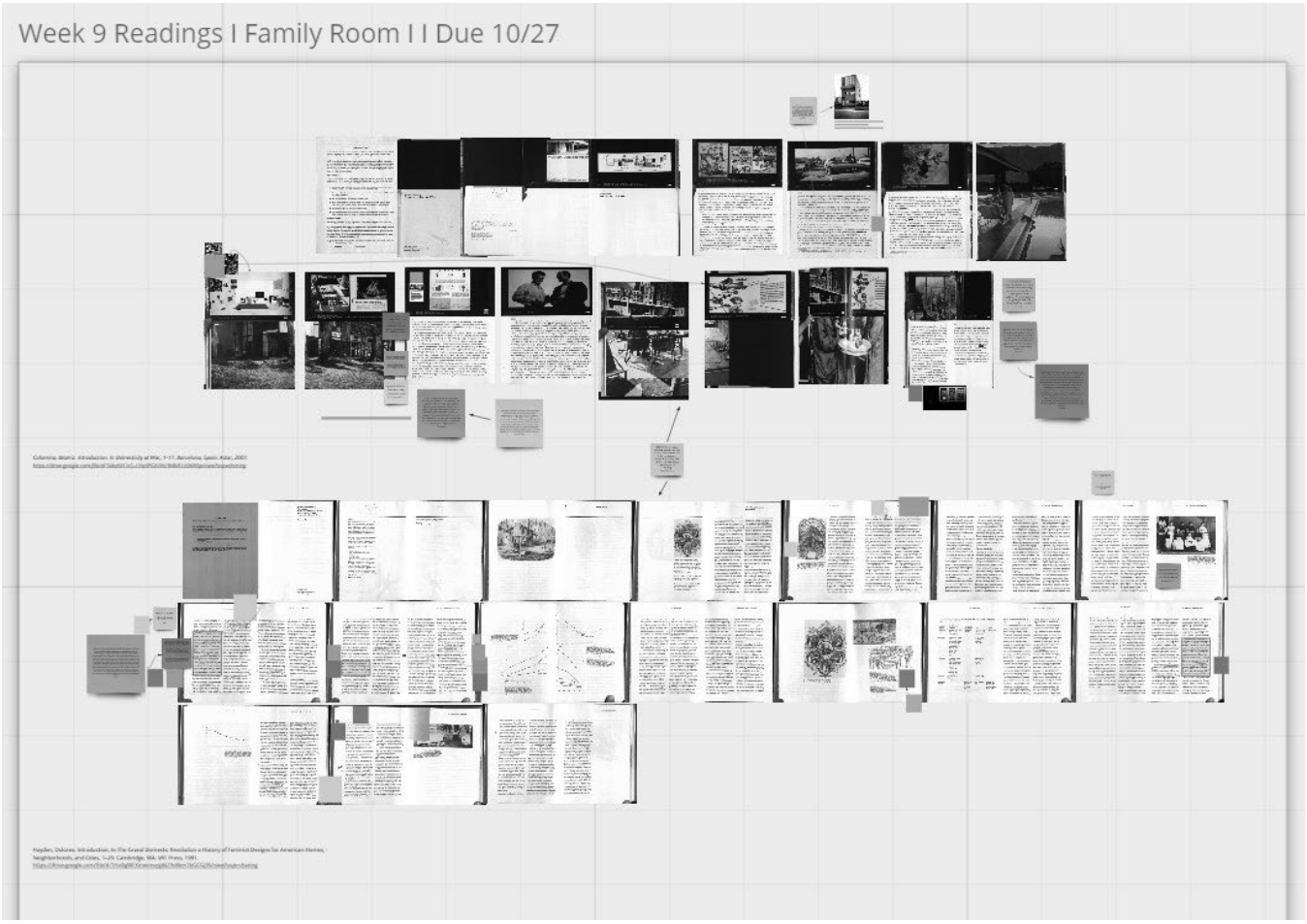

Figure 9.*Screenshot of asynchronous collaborative reading annotation on Miro. Fall 2021.* Assignment inspired by Daniel Cardoso Llach.

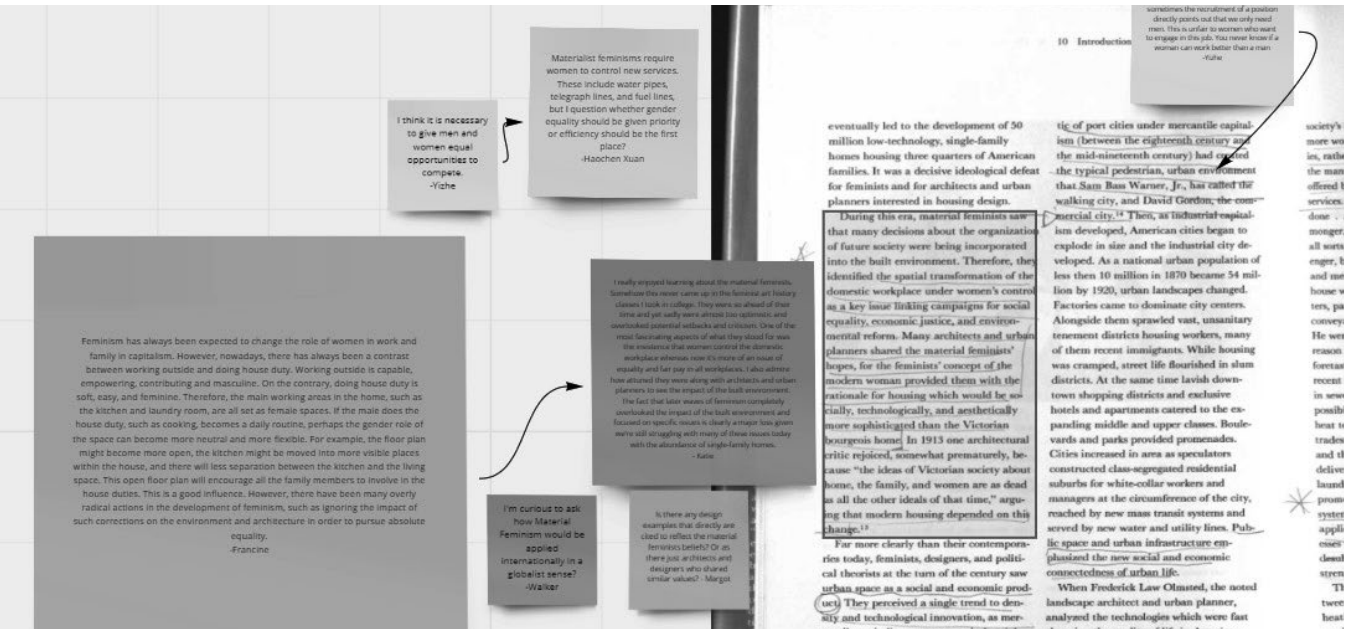

Figure 7. *Detail:asynchronous class reading discussion on Miro. Fall 2021.*

Room." Incorporating guest lectures from Thomas Yu (Asian Americans for Equality), Sarah Leavitt (Capital Jewish Museum), and Ifeoma Ebo (Blackspace), we analyze readings by authors including Daniel A. Barber, Germane Barnes, Dolores Hayden, A.L. Hu, Ursula Neuerburg-Denzer, Audrey Petty, Anna Puigjaner, and Amy Starecheski. Armed with research into the political dimensions of our most intimate environments, design students emerge better prepared to contribute to social equity through domestic interior work, the kind of project they may be most likely to encounter early in their career.

ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES INCORPORATING PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AND VIRTUAL, VISUAL COLLABORATION

This course is influenced by bell hooks's "assumption that we all bring to the classroom experiential knowledge, that this knowledge can indeed enhance our learning experience."[6] In weekly asynchronous, collaborative discussions on a virtual pin-board, students are invited to offer personal reflections to the week's readings and literally draw connections to specific passages. In a class of students with a range of identification with marginalized groups and housing insecurity, along with varying English proficiency, incorporating experiential knowledge in rigorous analysis has helped everyone to feel comfortable contributing to virtual and live conversations.

A strength of this course is that all students—like anyone with a home—spend the majority of their time in a domestic interior, particularly during the pandemic, making each of them a kind of subject matter expert. Live class sessions are built around student-led reading discussions, small-group exercises, and peer critique, offering a variety of ways to participate; I refer to students' virtual posts in class as a way to draw out those who might otherwise stay quiet. In final projects, which may take the form of a paper or pamphlet, students have explored personal topics in a scholarly way, for example examining Latinx cultural influences in interior design at the same time as they were considering their own relationship with their Colombian heritage. Students learn to question assumptions and to see their own experiences as valid contributions, and gain ways to examine how all American domestic interiors are political.

ENDNOTES

1. Amos Rapoport, *House Form and Culture* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969), p. 48.
2. Seema Agnani, "Bringing Basements to Code." Urban Omnibus, March 10, 2010. https://urbanomnibus.net/2010/03/bringing-basements-to-code/.
3. Jerome Chou, "Home." Open City, March 16, 2011. http://openthecity.org/?p=2463Bill.
4. W.E.B DuBois, "The Problem of Housing the Negro: II, The Home of The Slave." The Southern Workman, September 1901.
5. Elisabeth Coit, "Housing from the Tenant's Viewpoint," Architectural Record 91, no. 4 (April 1942), p. 72.
6. bell hooks, Teaching to Transgress: Education as a Practice of Freedom (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994), p. 84.