Gender Space Architecture
An interdisciplinary introduction
Gender Space Architecture

This significant text brings together for the first time the most important essays concerning the intersecting subjects of gender, space and architecture. Carefully structured and supplied with introductory essays, it guides the reader through theoretical and multi-disciplinary texts to direct considerations of gender in relation to particular architectural sites, projects and ideas.

Gender Space Architecture marks a seminal point in gender and architecture, both summarising core debates and pointing towards new directions and discussions for the future. It will be useful to a wide range of readers wishing to explore this burgeoning new field, including those from architecture, art history, anthropology, cultural studies, gender studies and urban geography.

Jane Rendell is Senior Lecturer in Architecture at the University of Nottingham. Barbara Penner is conducting her doctoral research into architecture and romance at Birkbeck College, London, Iain Borden is Director of Architectural History and Theory as well as Reader in Architecture and Urban Culture at The Bartlett, University College London.
THE ARCHITEXT SERIES

Edited by Thomas A.Markus and Anthony D.King

Architectural discourse has traditionally represented buildings as art objects or technical objects. Yet buildings are also social objects in that they are invested with social meaning and shape social relations. Recognising these assumptions, the Architext series aims to bring together recent debates in social and cultural theory and the study and practice of architecture and urban design. Critical, comparative and interdisciplinary, the books in the series will, by theorising architecture, bring the space of the built environment centrally into the social sciences and humanities, as well as bringing the theoretical insights of the latter into the discourses of architecture and urban design. Particular attention will be paid to issues of gender, race, sexuality and the body, to questions of identity and place, to the cultural politics of representation and language, and to the global and postcolonial contexts in which these are addressed.

Already published:

Framing Places
Mediating power in built form
Kim Dovey

Forthcoming titles:

Moderns Abroad
Italian colonialism and construction
Mia Fuller

The Architecture of Oppression
The SS, forced labor and the Nazi Monumental Building Economy
Paul Jaskot

Architecture and Language
Thomas A.Markus and Deborah Cameron

Spaces of Global Cultures
Anthony D.King

Beyond the Postcolonial
Architecture, Urban Space and Political Cultures
Abidin Kusno
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, ‘Joe has been in the closet for years,’ we are not recounting his efforts to match trousers and tie. Instead, we are describing how he makes himself known to others. In this sense, the closet refers to a way that identity, and 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 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, other room-like spaces, spaces of display. Each space—storage and display—excludes and defines, but also depends upon 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 certainty. 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.

The two closets resonate against one another within a linguistic and material network of representations that organise the relation between storage and display, secrecy and disclosure. The sexual closet refers, through an operation of metaphor, to 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 concretises the closet of identity, while the closet of identity literalises 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 liners, cleaning supplies and other provisions. The closet we know today was invented as a new spatial type in mid-nineteenth-century America. For centuries, Europeans and Americans had stored clothing in furniture; sometimes it hung from wall pegs or hooks. Now, for the first time, a kind of wall cavity was produced for household storage. Briskly disseminated among all social classes, the closet effectively outmoded wardrobe, armoire and chest. These free-standing, 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. By contrast, the closet presents itself more surreptitiously. Where the former are decorative objects, often lavished with paint, carving and inlay, the closet expresses itself only by a door plane, often smooth and unadorned. Unlike the closet, storage cabinets often display locks or key holes to indicate their concealed interior at the exterior surface. Free-standing, decorated, upright objects, armoires and the like are able to suggest, if not quite imitate, the clothed human body.

From about 1840 onwards, the closet offered, instead, diminished architectural expression. The storage of clothing had been respatialised as a kind of shameful secret. The closet not only concealed the things it contained but, significantly, it also promised to hide itself.

One of the most influential of the mid-nineteenth-century American ‘pattern books’, Andrew Jackson Downing’s Cottage Residences, first published in 1842, describes the closet in the following, perfunctory way:

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 apartments. Bed-rooms always require at least one closet to each, and more will be found convenient.1

As spaces which merely accompany fully described rooms, closets are outlined in plan drawings but not otherwise elaborated. This is likewise the case with another pattern book of the period, Samuel Sloan’s The Model Architect of 1852. Although
Sloan lavishes attention on a myriad aspects of house planning and construction, he mentions closets only in passing to say that they must be ‘fitted up and fully shelved’. Their height, ventilation, light, surface treatment and other spatial qualities are not represented at all. In these mid-nineteenth-century texts, as in constructed domestic space, the closet was rendered barely visible.

Concealing the storage of clothes and other possessions, the closet may have served to address widespread ambivalence about material acquisition and the accumulation of excess. 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 favour 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 while not interfering with 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 behaviour were given architectural form as, for instance, the stairway to second-floor bedrooms moved out of the entrance hall to a less visible part of the interior. Likewise, programmes 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.’ Consistent with other transformations of the American house, in a relatively small but powerful way, the closet provided concealment without eliminating access.

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 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, what was worn could sustain a kind of singular legitimacy. The closet contained the overflow of garments and their meanings to heed Downing’s maxim, a statement which 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. Consistent with other transformations of the American house, in a relatively small but powerful way, the closet provided concealment without eliminating access.

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, in fact, it is 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. A monogamous relation thus emerges between the closet and its room, between the room and its closet. The room relies exclusively on its closet and the closet depends uniquely upon 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 minimise 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. Moreover, 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, simultaneously 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 socio-cultural analysis of abjection examines how things which 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, incomplete elimination keeps that which is dirty present so it can constitute, by contrast, the cleanliness of the clean.8

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 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 reposition it across a boundary that is also a threshold. The closet door mediates imperatives of visual concealment and physical access, undermining the separation of closet and room while stabilising their difference.

The closet of sexual secrecy, named after the built-in closet, existed long before it was first called ‘the closet’ in the early 1960s. For at least a century, as David Miller, Eve Sedgwick, and others have demonstrated, the closet was a social and literary convention that narrated homosexuality as a spectacle of veiled disclosure.9 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 hetero-sexuality 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.’10

The closet organised 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 raise the spectre of gay identity even without forthright disclosure. One could neither be fully legible nor fully invisible; instead, dissemblance would serve to reveal a condition otherwise unstated.

‘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 phantasmatic impropriety required by heterosexuality
to secure its own proper domain, the 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 produced, among other events, the Stonewall riots of June 1969. The nascent gay rights movements identified the closet as a tool of homophobic heterosexism 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 idealistically, as a way of rejecting the closet and its hold on gay self-representation. And, indeed, within a regime of (almost) compulsory heterosexuality, the personal and political value of coming out must not be underestimated. But, at the same time, 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 upon 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 closet and room, 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 characterisation (‘gay’). These are crude and brittle words, unable to capture the diachronicity and multivalence of identity 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…L…LLL…LLLLL…Lawrence Welk fan.’

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 resignification. This is something Mikhail Bakhtin theorised 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, common among gay men during the 1970s, of displaying a coloured handkerchief in the rear jeans pocket. Appropriated from the uniform of labourers, 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 re-articulate 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 Martens. These gestures of détournement—when done well, and before they ossify into new norms—underscore the relation of homo- and hetero-sexualities without necessarily adopting the violence and inequity of their opposition. They are simultaneously effects of the closet and moments of its loosening.

Since the closet was invented alongside homo- and hetero-sexuality over a century ago, gay people have needed to work with and against it. Often the closet has served homophobic and heterosexist interests. At the same time, however, it has also provided for other, surprisingly articulate meanings.

The impressive architectural stability of the closet notwithstanding, it has not always—and need not necessarily—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 between storage and display, between the dirty and the clean, new opportunities for the representation of ‘identity’ 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 to 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 the 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, the closet also came to refer to a pew in the chapel of a castle occupied by the lord and his family. Through its various incarnations, the royal closet allowed for gathering and interaction with others.

A private retreat, a small gathering space, a wall cavity 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. It is in the ante-closet where one selects clothes, where one dresses and undresses oneself, where one changes.

I recall my discovery of the ante-closet when I was a young boy. There, standing before a built-in closet, I discovered 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 selfhood and otherness became completely confounded. The paired mirrors redoubled every gesture to infinity as I saw myself, in a moment of narcissistic plenitude, transformed: grownup, 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 another.18

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 dimension.19

The pli is not a secure idyll, a place of unobstructed selfhood. But it is, provisionally,
an enclave. Social codes, inequities and violence penetrate the *pli* through and through, and yet it remains possible, in this space, to work with them. In the *pli*, the representational range of clothing, the multivalence of sexualities and identities, does not threaten and does not need to be foreclosed.

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 registers the possibility of movement and spatial manipulation. At once conventional and abnormal, a moment of graphic folding, the door swing draws attention to the possibility of making and remaking space.

Like Doc Martens and hooded sweatshirts—worn by different people to diverse effects—the ante-closet is an effect of reappropriations and resignifications without end. It waits there, around the boundary between closet and room, for reactivation as the space of changing. It neither obliterates nor interferes with the spatial presence of closet or room, but brings them instead into a more complex and fluid adjacency. An expanded edge between closet and room, the ante-closet works with and against these spaces, dissolving their tired opposition to sustain the possibility of another arrangement.

We can imagine other kinds of ante-closets, other ways of elaborating the threshold between closet and room. A sliding rod that extends way beyond the closet; an inhabitable closet that is spatially continuous with its room; a closet that opens promiscuously to multiple spaces, even exposing itself to the exterior of the house: these are among the alternatives open to further architectural research. I have learned from my childhood encounter that the ante-closet is most exciting, most able to enrich the relation of storage and display when there is a play of scales from the bodily to the infinite and when the architectural elements can be manipulated—slid, swung, pushed or grabbed. Sometimes the ante-closet swells; at other times it recedes and disappears. It may be there if we desire it, if we need it, if we make it come between the closet and room.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

In addition to the organisers of Desiring Practices, I would like to thank the following people for helping me to advance the essay: Stephen Hartman, Catherine Ingraham, Mary McLeod, Joan Ockman, John Ricco, Brian Walker and Mark Wigley.

**NOTES**

4 Downing, Cottage, p. 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 steriliser, but we seldom manage to admit it to the closet.’ W.B. Field, _House Planning_, New York: McGraw Hill, 1940, p. 149.

   ‘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 indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality.’

11 Diana Fuss writes:

   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 exteriorisation, 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.

12 Sedgwick writes:

   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, p. 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?


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.


16 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’. Oxford English Dictionary, p. 349.

