INTRODUCTION

Approaching Home: New Perspectives on the Domestic Interior

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As we write this introduction, we find ourselves in a very different context than when we first sent our call for papers. The home is on everyone’s mind these days and the domestic experience is suddenly taking on new meanings for many people. The threat of COVID-19 has led to world-wide stay-at-home orders. Yet, the global pandemic has dramatically underscored that home is not a haven for all. Staying home, it seems, is contributing to increased depression, domestic violence, alcohol consumption, firearms purchases, and homelessness, and groups already at risk and often marginalized by governments and institutions see their sufferings heightened when forced to confine in a home. ¹ The claim that the home is unstable, precarious, and fragile, argued frequently in the literature focusing on themes of gender, race, age, poverty, violence and migration, seems especially pertinent.²

Noting that for women in particular the home is a dangerous place, and not because of strangers but because of family members, James Tyner cites the following alarming statistics: "Women in the United States are nine times more likely to be deliberately injured in their homes than on the streets; indeed, violence in the home accounts for more injuries than car accidents and muggings, combined. Furthermore, domestic homicides account for approximately one-third of all female homicides per year. By comparison, only 3 percent of men in the United States are murdered by their female spouses."³ Tyner’s research is a sobering reminder of how the home is constituted by power relations which are at times unequal.

Yet, while the articles in this issue do cast the home as a vulnerable, fraught, and contested space, they also reveal that it is central to forms of social association that would be impossible without the organizing forces of the domestic. As a spatial imaginary capable of being imbued with feelings of belonging, intimacy, and safety, and a site where the physical realities of space and materials, power relations, and economics hold sway,⁴ home can be defined in terms of the living that takes place there. In the Anarchist Guide to Historic House Museums, Franklin Vagnone recounts a story of how over time his family lovingly restored their character house in Philadelphia, only to see it reduced to a small pile of rubble by new owners. As he concludes, a house is “mostly empty space.” What makes a home, he tells us, is the “living that takes place within it, not the structure or its contents.”⁵ At the same time, living is always mediated by materiality, so that, as feminist geographers Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling argue, the home is both “material and imaginative.”⁶ While underscoring that “home is a process,” Blunt and Dowling emphasize the role of materiality, asserting that: “Home is a process of creating and understanding forms of dwelling and belonging. This process has both material and imaginative elements. Thus people create home through social and emotional relationships. Home is also materially created—new structures formed, objects used and placed.”⁷

The importance of both materiality and imagination in understandings of the home, as well as the universal experience of a relation or lack of relation with a home—has also meant that the domestic is a rich background for artists to explore, from folk art to full-scale installations and digital media work.⁸ | [fig. 1] | There is not enough space here to cover the diversity of practices that have approached the domestic, but...
powerful explorations of the home come to mind. The feminist explorations of materiality and collaborative practice present in *Womanhouse* (CalArts Feminist Art Program, 1971–72) paved the way for the narrative installations of Iris Häussler such as *He Named Her Amber* at the Art Gallery of Ontario (2007). Thinking about the home as a nexus of politics, economics, and culture is present as much in the filmic and photographic reframing of modern houses by Dorit Margreiter or Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle as it is in the large-scale three-dimensional transformations of exhibition spaces by Elmgreen & Dragset. And the haunting traces of domesticity in the work of Gordon Matta-Clark, Rachel Whiteread or Do Ho Suh have certainly contributed to their success and the strong emotional reactions that surround them. In all cases, the artists explore the relationships that emerge throughout and after the life of a house.

Such an approach to home as process, as always being produced by the interrelations amongst people, spaces, and things, leads to the conclusion that the identity of home is unfixed, since social relations are dynamic and ever-changing. As Justine Lloyd and Ellie Vasta argue in *Reimagining Home*, we are constantly making homes rather than being at home. At the same time, the home, as a place, is always located in a specific time and place, and therefore subject to social, political, and cultural forces that are deeply historical, as Raffaela Sarti reminds us in her study of the Early Modern European home that begins with homelessness, brought about by family breakdown as a result of disease, poverty, and famine. Moreover, as we shall see, the idea of home can be scaled up or down, from a specific structure, to a town, to a country, or to a transnational state of being not necessarily tied to a specific physical location. This dynamic approach to the home is borne out by the articles and accounts of practice in this volume, which demonstrate both the variability and endurance of the domestic across time and around the world. To highlight the relevance of home to current debates on community, representation, social justice, and materiality, we have organized the articles and accounts of practice under three intersecting themes: Community, Nation building, and Curated Domesticities.

**Community**

The home, as feminist geographer Doreen Massey reminds us, has always been “constructed out of movement, communication, and social relations,” constituted by social life that “stretches beyond it.” Much recent scholarship on the home emphasizes its fluid boundaries, its porous borders, and the complex interplay between “interior” and “exterior.” Steiner and Veel, underscoring the permeability of walls in their recent special issue of *Home Cultures* on the boundaries of home, speak of the walls of the home as mediating devices that perform specific ways of connecting inside and outside. They view the boundaries of the home as culturally negotiated. Approaching the home and the community as mutually-constituting allows us to interrogate binaries, such as public and private, or outside and inside. Returning to Massey’s ideas about the home as process, as the articles in this section show, we can’t separate home from society, but rather, as Blunt and Dowling reminds us, “the home is best understood as a site of intersecting spheres, constituted through both public and private,” in ways that are specific to both time and place. While themes of community inflect many of the articles in this issue, the three discussed in this section focus on illustrating different ways that the community and home are enmeshed across time periods and geographies, each one drawing on different kinds of sources for understanding the porosity of home.

Linda Stone-Ferrier’s article, “Glimpses, Glances, and Gossip: Seventeenth-century Dutch Paintings of Domestic Interiors on Their Neighbourhood’s Doorstep,” probes the fluid boundaries of home and neighbourhood. The home was new subject matter for Dutch artists of this period. Created in the context of an emerging open market for small domestic paintings, images of the Dutch domestic imaginary rapidly became in demand all over Europe. Examining these works alongside architectural features, furnishings, records of neighbourhood organizations, judicial records, moralizing writings, and popular farces, Stone-Ferrier shows how representations of open doors, windows, mirrors, iron bars, shutters, and other features that facilitated every-day forms of social interaction, including the glimpses and gossip referred to in the...
title, document the mutually-constituting movement of interior and exterior. It is through these regular, seemingly trivial neighbourhood social encounters that the domestic imaginary is formed. Resisting the binary construction of public versus private, Stone-Ferrier argues that such architectural features ‘represent the liminal intersection, rather than an impenetrable barrier between home and neighbourhood.’

In “Sweeping the Meydan: Home and Religious Ceremony Amongst the Alevi,” Angela Andersen and Can Gündüz continue the theme of community by examining the intertwining of the home and communal devotion in the homes of the Alevi, a Muslim minority in Turkey. As the authors argue, “Domestic arrangements of spiritual pursuits often reflect common religious practices within the wider community. Thus, the devotional acts and objects found within the dwelling, assumed to be ‘private’ in nature, are often closely linked to public practices.” In the processes of communal devotion, they show that domestic space plays a symbolic role through “the integration of daily life with core spiritual teachings and practices.”

Recalling Massey’s ideas about how the place of home is created through processes that are connected to forces outside the home, the authors argue that “there is no process to permanently distinguish the Alevi home space as a religious one,” rather, what transforms the space are “a choreographed series of rituals acts” that activate the home as the setting for communal devotion. As the authors show, the Alevi home is transformed into a religious space through people, words, actions, and objects. By these means, the home becomes a lived communal space of devotion. Multivalent domestic objects and features such as candles, serving dishes, brooms, and hearths are enlisted in the process, embodying “rich, lasting relationships between people, their practices, and settings for ritual.” The home, not only with its sense of security, but also with its association to lineage and community, is essential to the devotional practices of the Alevi.

**Nation Building**

The examples discussed by Stone-Ferrier and Andersen and Gündüz highlight the importance of the home in developing and encouraging social encounters. By extension, domestic environments also play an important role in defining political and cultural environments that position them beyond limited understandings of privacy and publicness. Activists have increasingly recognized this, challenging how normative representations of the home have been constructed to limit access to citizenship and civic participation. For example, second-wave feminists’ argument that “the personal is political,” while not specifically linked to a discussion of the physical space of the home, has influenced much feminist art. The enmeshment of politics in domesticity also means that domestic spaces and their representations act as a nexus for nation-building impulses, as the authors in the second group of articles explore. Using examples from the seventeenth century to today, they discuss how, far from being strictly private spaces, domestic spaces are everyday spaces of political expression and, as such, are constantly used to assert collective identities, including nationalistic ones.

In “(Re)imagining Asian Rulers in Athanasius Kircher’s China Illustrata: The Agency of Interiors,” Francesco Freddolini examines how Jesuit Athanasius Kircher used symbols of Western domesticity to visually translate foreign power, rather than attempt to directly reproduce the material and architectural contexts surrounding the Kangxi Emperor of China and the Mughal Emperor Jahangir. Working from Rome and drawing from previously published texts or accounts from fellow Jesuit missionaries, Kircher developed a series of illustrations that added to the text rather than simply demonstrating verbal statements. For Freddolini, this allowed Kircher to represent how he understood the agency of interiors to define foreign rulers’ public persona, positioning the sitters’ status and linking their body with the public and symbolic dimensions of his architectural context. However, sensing the altering effect of foreign symbols, Kircher adopted an occidentlalizing visual culture in the representation of the domestic environments surrounding the sitters.

The notion of translation is also present in Magdalena Milosz’s article, but to describe actions with very different objectives and impact. In “Simulated
Domesticities: Settings for Colonial Assimilation in Mid-Twentieth-Century Canada," Milosz brings us back to Canada, in the post-war era, to explore the lingering colonial assimilation project seeking to replace Indigenous patterns of dwelling. Her richly illustrated article underlines how the colonial impulse to replace traditions relies on Indigenous people “learning the language” of settlers, from the spoken language to the domestic architecture and habits that sustain a culture. Discussing different “contact zones,” including single-family dwellings, home economics classrooms in residential and day schools, and model houses, Milosz carefully presents how subtle cues embedded in the spaces and the landscapes create an ambivalence relative to their settler analogues that reveal the structure of settler colonialism and the settler-colonial anxieties about belonging that still shape today the design, use, and study of domestic spaces.

The final article in this section, by Mitchell B. Frank, similarly addresses assimilation and belonging, this time exploring painter Max Liebermann’s complex and ambivalent experience of the relationship between his Jewish and German identities at the turn of the twentieth century. Building on an analysis of Liebermann’s home, self-portraits, and representations of his home in the self-portraits, Frank discusses how Liebermann’s Berlin house, located in the heart of the city, can be interpreted not only as a physical place, but also as a socio-cultural position and language. Frank shows how the self-portraits engage in a dialogue of proximity and distance that echo his sense of belonging as an assimilated German Jew. While Liebermann’s increasing preoccupation with self-portraiture as the Jewish Question was becoming more and more heated may suggest a disengagement from politics, Frank argues that involvement and disengagement are not necessarily mutually exclusive and that the painter’s “fixation on his self-image may also suggest his struggles with...his comfort in and detachment from a sense of home.” Freddolini, Milosz, and Frank all highlight the importance of mediated representations in understanding the relationship between home and national identities. While Kircher’s translation of domestic symbols for a European audience and the Canadian government’s “domestication” of Indigenous bodies and environments might seem quite different from Liebermann’s self-representations, they all deliberately attempt to frame how the home shapes one’s relation to a nation.

Curated Domesticities

Freddolini, Milosz, and Frank’s focus on the implicit assumptions present in mediated representations of the home raise questions about institutions that are explicitly engaged in a project of curating the past and present, such as art galleries and museums. Many of those institutions shape unique embodied experiences of past homes through historic house museums and period rooms. The third group of articles, Marie-Ève Marchand’s “Exposer l’intérieur domestique: le cas de la salle Boucher de la Frick Collection,” Katherine Dennis’s “‘Reflections on One Story among Many.’ Account of Practice : Memories of the Future III (2018),” and Katherine Lapierre’s “L’Outsider et le potentiel évolutif de l’image de la maison,” engage how exhibition frameworks provide new ways to think about these ubiquitous yet deeply mediated representations of home and bring unique opportunities to challenge understandings of past and current domesticities. In these articles, the shift in either location or use creates ambiguity in the reception of interior spaces that asks audiences to rethink their relation to the domestic and to imagine the dynamic and fluctuating lives they sustain.

Katherine Dennis’s curatorial project Memories of the Future, which invited artists to intervene in a number of historic house museums in Toronto and Vancouver, bears witness to the key role that contemporary artists have played in interrogating constructions of home. Artists have the capacity to revitalize the contemporary relevance of preserving historic homes, which can be perceived as elitist, insular, and old-fashioned, providing dull, predictable or disappointing experiences. Artists can re-energize pre-existing stories, deconstruct them, or create new stories, allowing the visitor to emotionally connect with the domestic imaginary conjured by the home. By exposing domestic complexities, artists reveal the real-life messiness of the processes of home. They also provide the possibility of moving beyond the apparent focus on the socially-acceptable
narratives of elite or bourgeois family life to include more diverse stories, which can engage the diversity of the communities within which they are located. Artists can challenge us to rethink the history of the domestic by asking who holds the authority to recreate the past, allowing us to question what social values are being promoted. Dennis’ account of practice discusses the third iteration of Memories of the Future, a curatorial project which invited artists to create installations within historic house museums in Toronto and Vancouver. Working at the Roedde House Museum, an 1893 heritage home in Vancouver, the artists Diyan Achjadi and Cindy Mochizuki created stories that complicated the museum’s master narrative of a patriarchal, middle-class European immigrant family, speaking instead to Canada’s colonial past and present. In conversation with the domestic setting, these artworks “exposed the codes and motivations that influence such spaces, from their framing to their furnishings,” by quietly inserting “the presence of other people, cultures, and histories.” Through the critical curation of institutional representations of the home like the Roedde House, Dennis’ curatorial intervention demonstrates the potential of domestic museums not only to reach new communities, but also to unsettle preconceptions about home and the histories we tell ourselves.

In addition to historic house museums, so-called period rooms located within museums have long provided representations of the domestic. While curators have at times questioned the value of such displays, they have lately enjoyed a resurgence and a new relevance. In part, this has been due to efforts to make them relevant to contemporary concerns, an objective largely achieved by engaging artists to intervene, or by dramatizing them through lighting, staging displays of costumes, and by other means. By these methods, rather than static representations of past styles, they have been reborn as sites of social engagement. Marchand’s fine-grained analysis of the Boucher Room (la salle Boucher) in the Frick Collection in New York City brings a critical lens to the deeply mediated nature of period rooms, underscoring their nature as complex museum objects, the credibility of which lies in their ability to mask their heterogeneity. Focusing on how spatiality and the muséification of domestic spaces, Marchand interrogates the role of the period room in knowledge production about the historical interior. Through an analysis of the hybrid space of the Boucher Room as both constructed representation of an eighteenth-century interior and the boudoir created for Mrs. Frick in the early twentieth century, which, in turn, is mediated by the room’s location within a residence that was both domestic and designed to become a museum housing the family’s collection, Marchand asks, what history of the domestic interior is being presented to visitors? As Marchand concludes, reflections on the spatial plurality of the Boucher Room provide the opportunity to create a more complex, diverse, and dynamic history of the domestic interior within the museum environment. Marchand’s sensitive reading of the spatial and temporal hybridity of the Boucher Room reveals the futility of the “period room” to fix time. By documenting the spatial hybridity of such representations of domesticity, Marchand’s analysis substantiates our approach to home as an unfixed and dynamic place created out of the ever-changing interplay of the social and the material. Unlike Dennis and Marchand, Lapierre’s account of practice does not describe a historic space, but she similarly explores the layers of meanings and influences supporting the domestic imaginary. Interested in how domestic environments can foster renewed relationships between art and architecture, she discusses her exhibition Outsider from 2018 in which she collaboratively developed (with artist Jérôme Ruby) models for three house-sculptures, building on her PhD research on self-construction and outsider architectures. For Lapierre, the process that arises from thinking of architecture as art forces us to rethink collaborative practices by challenging the predominant role of architects and shifting the focus to the individual as a creative force. The resulting prototypes—Bulles (Bubbles), Tour (Tower), and Blocs (Blocks)—use Gaston Bachelard’s concept of material images and Jean Dubuffet’s “proto-images” to explore the relation between imagination and rationality, but also to amalgamate diverse references into complex constructions attached to examples of Montréal’s traditional plexes. Bulles
references Frederick Kiesler, Ferdinand Cheval (celebrated by André Breton and the surrealists), the bubble houses of Joël and Claude Unal or Sappho Morissette and Jean-Guy Ruel, the Dogon dwellings, and the Brutalists. Tour scales and transforms Jean Dubuffet’s Tour aux Figures to the domestic scale and shifts its function to the useless, challenging the potential of domesticity. Finally, Blocs, taking inspiration from nineteenth-century eclecticism and Gaudí’s Sagrada Familia, opposes gravity and suggests a space that both protects and frightens. For Lapierre, the three prototypes are poetic interrogations of domestic architecture that rely on primordial images of the house to challenge a world increasingly ruled by normative visions. Furthermore, like Dennis and Marchand, she highlights the important presence of the domestic interior in art and history institutions, challenging once again the private/public binary.

**Book Reviews**

We believe the research and practice presented in this special issue is an important contribution to the increasing global scholarship about the domestic interior and its relation to culture, art, and social and political life. To complete this, *RACAR* has commissioned reviews that reflect on the work of scholars, creators, or publishers exploring and challenging common understandings of the domestic interior. First, Eva Baboula reviews *Sacred Ritual, Profane Space: The Roman House as Early Christian Meeting Place* by Jenn Cianca, and Can Gündüz and Angela Andersen, who also contributed to this issue, review *Domestic Devotions in the Early Modern World*, edited by Marco Faini and Alessia Meneghin, both published in 2018. The two books explore the complex relation between religious practice and the home. Next, Colin Ripley reviews the collection *Design and Agency: Critical Perspectives on Identities, Histories, and Practices*, edited by John Potvin and Marie-Ève Marchand, who also contributed to this issue, and John Potvin reviews *Unplanned Visitors: Queering the Ethics and Aesthetics of Domestic Space* by co-guest editor Olivier Vallerand. Both books, published last spring, address how agency and identities have intersected with the design of objects, spaces and people since the early twentieth century. Building on similar concerns, Vallerand reviews the exhibition and catalogue *Our Happy Life: Architecture and Well-Being in the Age of Emotional Capitalism / Nos jours heureux: Architecte et bien-être à l’heure du capitalisme émotionnel*, curated by Francesco Garutti at the Canadian Centre for Architecture in 2019. The exhibition and catalogue question how global obsessions with happiness and quality of life have changed how we perceive and design spaces and, importantly, domestic environments. The last reviews cover artists and architects rethinking our relation to the house. Menno Hubregtse reviews the monograph *boundary sequence illusion—Ian MacDonald Architect*, edited by Brian Carter and published in 2019, the latest entry in Dalhousie Architectural Press’ celebrated Documents in Canadian Architecture series. Marie-Paule Macdonald follows with a combined review of three 2018 publications: Kitty Scott’s *Theaster Gates: How to Build a House Museum*, the catalogue for an exhibition held at the Art Gallery of Ontario; Lezli Rubin-Kunda’s *At Home: Talks with Canadian Artists About Place and Practice*; and Mark Wigley’s *Cutting Matta-Clark: The Anarchitecture Investigation*, based on the archives held at the Canadian Centre for Architecture. Collectively, these recent publications contribute to the new perspectives on the domestic interior offered by this special issue of *RACAR*.

Gaston Bachelard’s widely quoted poetic interpretation of home as “our first universe,” a place of dreaming, memory and imagination may not be the experience of those forced to “shelter in place” because of the pandemic. Yet, reflecting on the disparate experiences of the home across time and around the world, we hope the texts and works presented in this issue offer inspiring insights into the joys and challenges of our attachments to specific places, of having to dwell sometimes alone, sometimes with others.

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4. Peter Hopkins (London : Routledge, 2010), 79–120


