

Reviews Recensions

John Potvin

Bachelors of a Different Sort: Queer Aesthetics, Material Culture and the Modern Interior in Britain

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Erin J. Campbell

THE HOME IS A COMPLEX CULTURAL artifact. Philosopher Gaston Bachelard tells us the home is “our first universe,” where the thoughts, dreams, and memories of humankind are integrated.¹ Social anthropologist Mary Douglas argues that the home is a “realization of ideas” in time and space about people’s lives.² With *Bachelors of a Different Sort: Queer Aesthetics, Material Culture and the Modern Interior in Britain*, winner of the *Historians of British Art Book Prize*, John Potvin offers a much-needed intervention into our understanding of difference and the home. Potvin, who has published widely on the performance of masculinity in the spheres of fashion, interior design, and collecting, aims to show, with this meticulously researched, fluently written, and well-illustrated text, how “queer men...negotiated, designed and performed domestic space” (26). Seeking to move beyond binaries and divisions and thereby “purposefully cross the threshold into spaces that accommodated cultural, social, sexual and aesthetic difference” (25),

Potvin demonstrates how the British bachelors examined in the book redefined domesticity. By focusing on the material cultures of solitary or coupled queer bachelors, the fashioning of their homes, their collecting practices, and their embodied selves, the text sheds light on a neglected area of scholarship in current design histories and studies of the interior. Seeking to examine “alternative and subversive relationships to space, materiality and time” (9), Potvin’s intervention is liberating. While queer studies specialists may have other points to make about the value of this text, my approach to Potvin’s analysis is as a scholar of the domestic interior, and I would argue that his move to unsettle and complicate the home should challenge all scholars of the domestic interior to re-examine assumptions. By using the lens of difference to underscore the ambivalent, fluid, and idiosyncratic nature of the home, Potvin’s book shows us that in fact all domestic interiors are contingent and inherently unstable. The true value of this book thus lies in

its ability to show us that the home is constituted by the always shifting relationships among objects, spaces, and people. Equally valuable is Potvin’s complication of the public and private spheres binary, showing how the division between these spheres is shifting, opportunistic, and ultimately false. Moreover, in foregrounding the importance of the country home as a locus of sociability and self-fashioning, the book also undermines the binary between urban and rural that typically governs studies of the modernist interior. A significant strength of the text is its ability to weave together a wide array of domestic environments both real and conceptual, including gardens, stage sets, imaginary interiors, and interior designs. The focus on the experiential dimension of domesticity is another strength, which Potvin develops through reminiscences, descriptions, and photographs of the interiors.

To examine the collecting practices, material cultures, and interiors of Potvin’s selected bachelors, the book is organized into case studies, which are divided into three sections of two chapters each: “Wilde spaces,” “Country Living,” and “Stage Design for Living.” Underlying this framework is a typology based on what Potvin calls the “Seven Deadly Sins,” which he uses as a wedge to break apart the canonical narratives of the modern interior while providing a clearly defined rubric of anti-modernist design. Functioning as the theoretical and methodological framework for the text, these so-called sins or “markers of excess” (27), Potvin argues, are exemplified by many or all of his subjects. However, each case study highlights one of the sins, which are: queerness, idolatry, decadence, asceticism (the unnatural training of the self), decoration, glamour, and artifice. The individual case studies profile a range of individuals, from socially elevated lords to bohemian artists, photographers, and playwrights. The time frame of the text is bracketed by two significant developments in the

history of homosexuality in Britain, the Labouchere Amendment (1885) and the Wolfenden Report (1957). Potvin argues that these two key moments “characterize the manner in which the queer bachelor necessarily negotiated the privacy and publicity of the domestic sphere” (22). The Labouchere Amendment made same-sex sexual activity illegal not only in public but also in private, whereas the Wolfenden Report, which, despite its flaws, was an important step in the decriminalization of homosexuality in Britain, asserted that the law was not to interfere with citizens’ private lives. Significantly for the study of the domestic interior, Potvin argues that the Labouchere Amendment and Wolfenden Report both “redefine homosexuality and queer identity in distinctly spatial terms along the private/public axis” (24).

The first chapter of the first section, “Wilde Spaces,” examines the writing, interiors, and collecting practices of Lord Ronald Charles Sutherland Gower (1845–1916), who was the youngest son of George Granville, second Duke of Sutherland and the largest landowner in Britain. Gower moved in circles close to Queen Victoria and served Parliament as a Liberal politician from 1818 to 1876. He was also a sculptor. His publication *Bric À Brac* or *Some Photoprints Illustrating Art Objects at Gower Lodge, Windsor* (London, 1888) documents the collection that he housed in Gower Lodge, which he acquired in 1876. Informed by an interpretive framework inspired by Oscar Wilde’s domestic life and aesthetic theories, this chapter’s focus on Gower allows Potvin to ask “what might constitute a queer collection. Is it simply the sexual nature of the objects themselves or the identity of the collector? What do we make of the performative, sensual, edifying, phenomenological and embodied practices of collecting for men within the domestic realm?” (43). As Potvin argues, “Gower’s highly idiosyncratic

collecting programme in addition to his interiors materialized an alternative to the heteronormative understanding of heritage, lineage, progeny and inheritance” (44).

The second chapter in this section focuses on the British artists Charles de Sousy Ricketts (1866–1931) and Charles Hazelwood Shannon (1863–1937). Referring to their domestic space and collection as “a queer intimacy materialized” (85), Potvin argues that “their case highlights the, at times, precarious and opaque relationships between sexuality/domesticity, aesthetics/masculinity and collecting/consuming” (85). Drawing on a range of sources, including “photographs and recollections, memories, and reminiscences” (84), in the context of the Aesthetic Movement, which he argues lived on in their homes, Potvin’s approach is guided by the “overall sensations and visual impact” (84) that their domestic spaces had on visitors: “Objects and people move through and alter spaces, no matter how controlled and controlling are the custodians of these interiors” (84). Underscoring that domestic space is both private and public, Potvin presents the home as a highly social and tangible concatenation of design, collecting, and phenomenological exchanges between people and things, which offered “differing sites for the interpolation of the aesthetic (queer subject)” (85).

In the following section, “Country Living,” the first chapter explores the domestic world of Edward Perry Warren (1860–1928), who embraced an ideal of Greek love at his home, Lewes House, in East Sussex. The second chapter in this section focuses on the homes and gardens of the artists Sir Cedric Morris (1889–1982) and Arthur Lett-Haines (1894–1978), who lived together for sixty years. A photograph of them taken ca. 1930–36 is on the cover of the book. Drawing on a collection of memories and reminiscences brought together in 2002 in *Benton End Remembered* (named after the sixteenth-century

Georgian-fronted Elizabethan house near Hadleigh that they purchased in 1939), Potvin uses the chapter to critique the exclusion by modernist history and criticism of the domestic and the decorative. As he asserts, “The history of British modern art has yet to be written with a view toward the study of the interior, despite how it has informed the developments of British modernism itself” (192).

In the final section, “Stage Design for Living,” Potvin examines the domestic practices of the actor and playwright Noël Coward (1899–1973) and the photographer, diarist, and stage and costume designer Cecil Beaton (1904–1980). The chapter on Coward moves back and forth between “life and design on and off the stage” (201), allowing Potvin to explore the way “spatial divisions between reality and fiction were blurred while the borders marking private from public were collapsed” (201). Demonstrating the hybrid nature of domestic space, Potvin asserts that “In the theatrical space of the home and home as stage for modernism, Coward advertised modern design as much as he played out modern sexualities; what he staged, in other words, was modern living itself” (201). Hence, Potvin combines Coward’s interiors, designs, and material culture together with his private persona and public life, to argue that they “betray a fundamental tension between modernity, sexuality and the art of performing the self” (201). Beaton’s cultural significance as an example of someone who describes the “domestic spaces of influential figures of the early twentieth century”—including Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas—lies in “his ability to bridle an unholy relationship between shame and artifice as a creative and productive means of resistance which he staged in domestic performances and interior designs” (250).

In his conclusion, Potvin reminds us that the task of research is to recognize that “The archive is itself a modern interior equally charged with

limitations and possibilities” (288), because “difference is real, dynamic and boundless” (289).

Potvin reiterates that the goal of the text is to uncover “the narratives of design, domesticity and how gender and sexuality altered and were affected by these narratives” (289). In particular, he makes the provocative case that shame is key: “Shame and design make uneasy bedfellows and yet they comprise the politics of aesthetics of the modern interior” (288). Shame has an effect on the material components of interior design as well as the configuration of spaces. Shame, Potvin tells us “erects walls” while “materializing phobia and panic” (288). Shame resists but also motivates. It “builds things of beauty” (288). While Potvin makes the case that shame is an integral part of queer identity, his conception of the aesthetics of shame is applicable to the domestic interiors of other times, places, and identities.

Potvin asserts that “domestic spaces materialize the building of lives, as much as they are sites of ideological struggle, tension and resistance, the material stuff of identity. They form the landscape wherein ... gender and sexual difference are coded, performed and circumscribed” (288). In doing so, he sets the agenda for continuing the important work modelled by this essential study. ¶

Erin J. Campbell is associate professor of early modern European art in the Department of Art History & Visual Studies of the University of Victoria.

—erinjc@uvic.ca

1. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston, 1994), 4, 6.

2. Mary Douglas, “The Idea of a Home: A Kind of Space,” *Social Research* 58, 1 (Spring 1991): 290.

Heather Hyde Minor

Piranesi's Lost Words

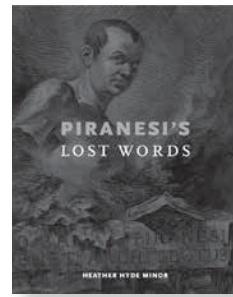
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Alexis H. Cohen

GIOVANNI BATTISTA PIRANESI—an inspired interpreter of classical antiquity whose prolific artistic output and outsized personality made him a fixture of the Republic of Letters—remains one of the most famous and well-studied figures of the eighteenth century. Known primarily as an engraver and printmaker, Piranesi has also been celebrated and studied as an architect, designer, collector, archaeologist, and antiquarian. In her most recent book, *Piranesi's Lost Words*, Heather Hyde Minor uses a wealth of eighteenth-century archival sources, many unpublished, to argue that Piranesi's most significant appellation is as *author* and that his books “were his most powerfully creative art” (209).

Through this beautifully illustrated book, Minor guides her reader through four major works in Piranesi's published oeuvre, showing how text and image are intertwined in a composite art-form manufactured through complex material, social, and intellectual processes. Divided into two parts, broadly organized around the concepts of “reading” and the “how” of making, the book begins with an examination of Piranesi's earliest folio, the *Antichità romane* (*Roman Antiquities*, 1756, 4 vols.). Through an anatomical dissection of the book, Chapter 1 guides the twenty-first-century reader through its constituent elements—frontispiece, imprimatur, texts, etchings, paper, ink, etc.—highlighting conventions of eighteenth-century book-making while also placing Piranesi's celebrated plates in their original bibliographic context. Minor



establishes connections between her material engagement with the *Antichità romane* and Piranesi's experimentation with the expressive potential of print and its ability to investigate the antique past through its modes and methods of representation. Chapter 2 continues this exploration of the *Antichità* but from an eighteenth-century perspective, bringing to life Piranesi's contemporary readers and the spaces in which they would have encountered his works, be they libraries, book auctions, or Bouchard & Gravier's shop in Rome. By animating Piranesi's milieu, his relationship to various audiences, and the circulation of his books, the chapter also illuminates eighteenth-century perspectives on the collaborative nature of the study of antiquity.

In Part 2, which begins with Chapter 3, Minor turns to the *Campus Martius antiquae urbis* (*The Field of Mars of Ancient Rome*, 1762), paying particular attention to Piranesi's use of fragmentary textual and material remains to both reconstruct and interpret ancient Rome. Chapter 4 studies *Della magnificenza ed architettura de' Romani* (*On the Magnificence and Architecture of the Romans*, 1761), a work in which Piranesi engages the contemporary Greco-Roman controversy, famously arguing for the relative superiority of the ancient Romans over the Greeks. Minor shows how Piranesi expanded his methodological repertoire by drawing not just on ancient sources, but also on modern interpretations of ancient objects published by peers like Julien-David Le Roy who believed,