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A Feral Domesticity: On Spatial Prosthesis and Coping with Latepostmodern Identity Construction

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A Feral Domesticity:
On Spatial Prosthesis and Coping with Latepostmodern
Identity Construction

A Thesis Presented for the
Master of Architecture
Degree
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ABSTRACT

This critique of domesticity questions how subjects in a latepostmodern, intra-digital society construct and house their strewn-out identities via object and spatial prosthesis.

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CHAPTER ONE

FAMILIAR HORROR

On Identity Construction

Home is the site of identity construction; it houses the complex and strange fragments we schlep, both physical and psychological. The activities in which one engages along the course of the quotidian ultimately come to rest in the home. It is a storage facility, a spatial prosthetic[1] that provides varying degrees of separation from the external world. One's mind is unpacked at home.

This relationship with space, that is to say, the natural relationship of an individual with a space characterized by the relaxing of the limbs, the cyclical cluttering and clearing of one's mind, and the storing of props that give physical form to one's identity, is often referred to as "domestic," but the concept of "domesticity" is not a naturally occurring state. Pier Vittorio Aureli and Maria Shéhérazade Giudici describe the constructed idea of domesticity as a "familiar horror," a term originally coined by Paolo Virno. In Familiar Horror: Toward a Critique of Domestic Space, Aureli and Giudici argue that the horror sets in when one, "realiz[es] that society is caught in a tangle of psychological constraints and needs that are not natural or unavoidable at all, a tangle in which people are subjugated through their very desires."[2] That our desires are not always natural may be an uneasy realization, but it is

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[1] Mark Wigley, "Prosthetic Theory: The Disciplining of Architecture"
[2] *Familiar Horror*, page 127

neither worthwhile nor possible to undo this "horror." It is ingrained into our collective psyche due to centuries of expectations for gendered behavior, civic duty, and "good taste." The struggle now must be to reconcile the assumptions of domesticity, the domestic forms Architecture has given us in the past century, and the many varied ways in which we live. In a modern culture infatuated with "hygge"[3] and simultaneously striving to globalize and preserve tradition, this reconciliation could be as varied as the individuals involved. However, acceptance is the first step to recovery, and the first notion we must accept is that the spatial counterpart in this relationship is not pulling its weight. We no longer behave as we did in the Victorian Era or the postwar 1950s, but much of the spaces we dwell in still do. Functioning in a space designed for a domesticity so at odds with reality takes a psychological toll on a human already working to construct an inner architecture to house the fragments of his or her identity (fig. 1).

[3] https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/24/fashion/wintering-the-danish-way-learning-about-hygge.html

Figure 1: Pixelface, Source: Jinyongkim via Uglyluap

The Human/Object Condition

Because of the cycle between the collection and storage of the fragments of our identities, the house becomes a home for cold, immobile objects as much as a home for a warm, mobile bodies. The objects housed in domestic space have individual meanings and histories of their own. The everyday kitchen knife had a purpose and narrative packaged within it before it was brought into the home, but once it has been claimed as property, it begins its life as one particular knife, one with a new meaning, new consequences, and new narratives. Objects become loaded once they are curated in the home. The process of curation is a product of the human condition, and is not for the sake of the object, but for the sake of the human. The collection of possessions is not an activity that aids in survival, at least not in the primitive sense; man does not need pipe tobacco to survive, and certainly not fourteen varieties. However, the struggle to survive has evolved along with the humans who struggle. Survival is no longer defined solely by physical activities of eating, breathing, or sleeping. Psychological survival has become just as important for the well-functioning human in the modern world.

Hannah Arendt describes the human condition in terms of history and how the elements of existence have evolved with us since antiquity.[4] Where once there were clear distinctions between the vita activa and vita contemplativa, the divisions have become muddier and muddier. Arendt argues that there is no longer a realm (public,

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[4] Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition

private, or social) free from necessity, as biological needs have pervaded state governance and work has taken up residence in the home (fig. 2).

Arendt's insights have clearly picked up more and more speed in the decades since she wrote them, as evidenced by the swiftness with which presidential typos traipse into the late-night in-bed twitter scroll or the comforts of home creep into the workplace cubical. The open spaces of the plan libre, though intended to represent the newfound freedom offered by modern technology, became the site of what can now be recognized as a sort of architectural agoraphobia.[5] The effect of throwing the blanket of the public over the realm of the private, of introducing work into labor, essentially kick-started the blurriness of identity we increasingly experience today. Just as the tenants of Mies' Lakeshore Drive apartments "built up walls and reconstructed the 'familiar horror' of the bourgeois rooms," we cling today to physical objects to aid in the process of identity construction.[6]

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[5] https://shannonlynettebuchanan.wordpress.com/2013/03/30/modernists-and-the-free-plan/
[6] Aureli & Giudici, Familiar Horror: Revisiting the Architecture of the Street, the Block and the Room

POLIS
government
global market
the internet

AGORA
community
school
workplace

OIKOS
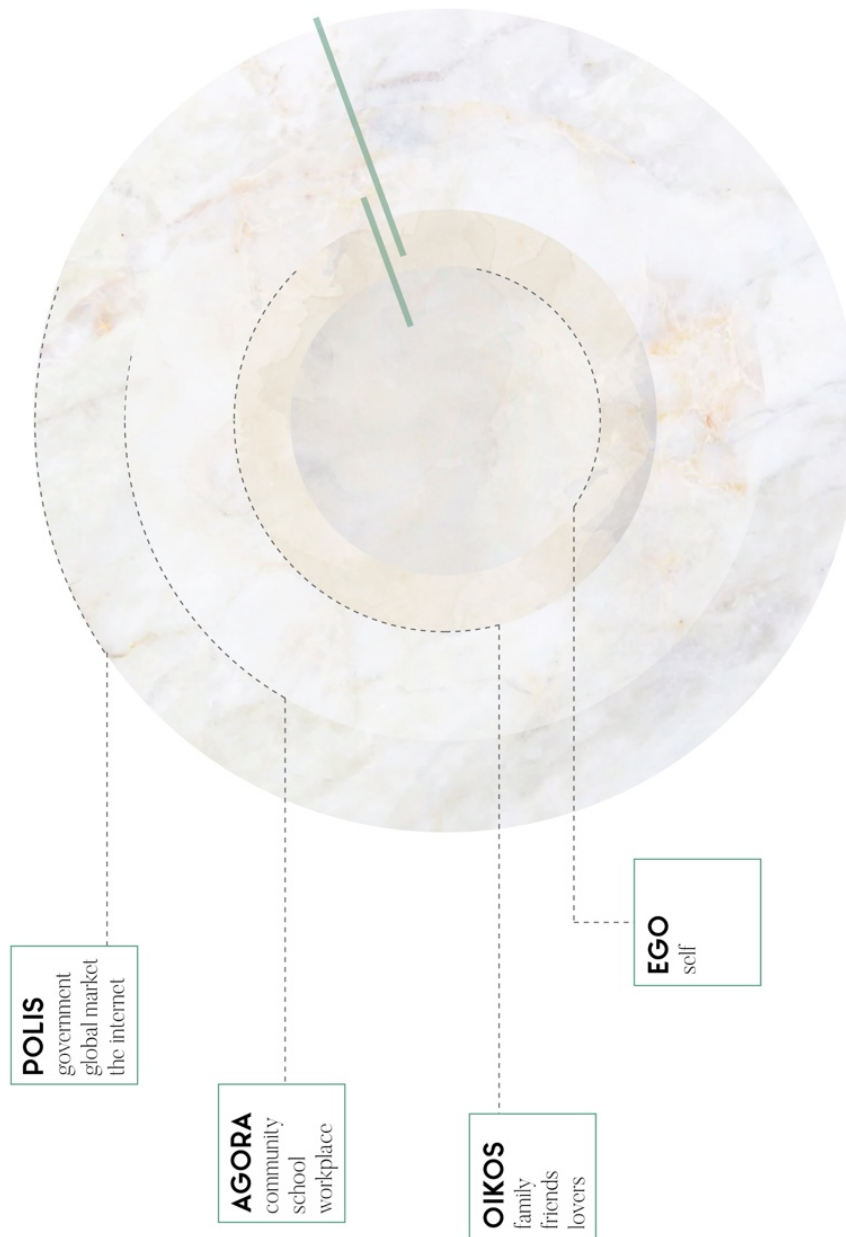family
friends
lovers

EGO
self

Figure 2: Arendt's Social Strata

On Object Prosthesis

The idea of architecture serving as an extension of the body is not new, nor is the blurring of the self as a result of this extension unique to the human experience in the Digital Age. There is proof of an awareness of the relationship between the human body and space as long ago as when Vitruvius claimed the human body is the source off all proportion and symmetry to be used in building.[7] However, this relationship has evolved from structure and ornament simply mimicking the proportions of a human to the structure shedding its ornament and becoming man's ornament itself, so to speak. In Prosthetic Theory: The Disciplining of Architecture[8], Mark Wigley argues that modern architecture itself was a prosthesis, quoting Le Corbusier:

> "We all need means of supplementing our natural capabilities, since nature is indifferent, inhuman (extra-human), and inclement; we are born naked and with insufficient armor; [...] filing cabinets and copy-letters make good the inadequacies of our memory; wardrobes and sideboards are the containers in which we put away the auxiliary limbs that guarantee us against cold or heat, hunger or thirst...Our concern is with the mechanical system that surrounds us, which is no more than an extension of our limbs; its elements, in fact, artificial limbs."[9]

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[7] Vitruvius, Ten Books, Book III, Chapter I, Paragraph 3

[8] Prosthetic Theory, page 7

[9] Le Corbusier, The Decorative Art of Today, trans. James I. Dunnett (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987), 72. On this passage and the whole argument about architecture as a form of clothing that organizes it, see Mark Wigley, "Architecture After Philosophy: Le Corbusier and the Emperor's New Paint," Journal of Philosophy and the Visual Arts 2 (1990): 84-95.

Wigley continues to describe architecture as a "surrogate body," intended to supplement its inhabitants.[10] It is thought-provoking enough to consider architecture an extension of the self, an augmentation meant to emphasize, aid, and improve. But Le Corbusier extends this idea to the objects within the structure, comparing them to mechanical versions of our own body parts, diligently working to pick up the slack where the flawed human fails, or fears to fail. This point is crucial for understanding life within the domestic space, where accoutrements often must stand in for the whole. Another important aspect of Wigley's argument is the psychological effect of the prosthetic, [which can henceforth be synonymous with domestic space and domestic objects.] It is a presupposition of the prosthetic that the body to which it is attached is somehow insufficient, and an effect of all prostheses that the self becomes blurred.[11] The ability to utilize this blur as a tactic in identity construction is proof of our long struggle to cope with domesticity and with its familiar horror.

[10] Prosthetic Theory, page 8
[11] Prosthetic Theory, page 8

CHAPTER TWO

PROGRAM CONSIDERATIONS

On Dwelling

The assumption that the spaces in which we dwell are not in congruence with how we dwell begs the question, "Well then, how do we dwell?" The most important element in answering this has so far been recognizing the activities the dwelling place must accommodate (fig. 3). First and foremost, and perhaps the only common thread among all dwellers, is the act of identity construction. This act involves a daily indexing, a cataloging, a stripping and recovering. By its very nature this process is mostly psychological. The program of the dwelling place is thus extremely cerebral. The programmatic behavior we need from it is that of a warehouse of sorts, or a filing cabinet, but the spatial qualities we require are likely not the same.

After the Enlightenment, the rules of identity reshuffled extremely due to a growing middle-class eager to give form to their new positions in society. As a result, spaces within the home, as well as calculated definitions of domesticity itself, were utilized to communicate very specific information about those dwelling inside them.[12] The dwellings of the 18th century particularly contributed a sense of privacy that had hitherto not been considered a necessity in the home. As John Archer explains in his book Architecture and Suburbia, the ideology of the Enlightenment had essentially presented every individual with the task of constructing his or her own identity from

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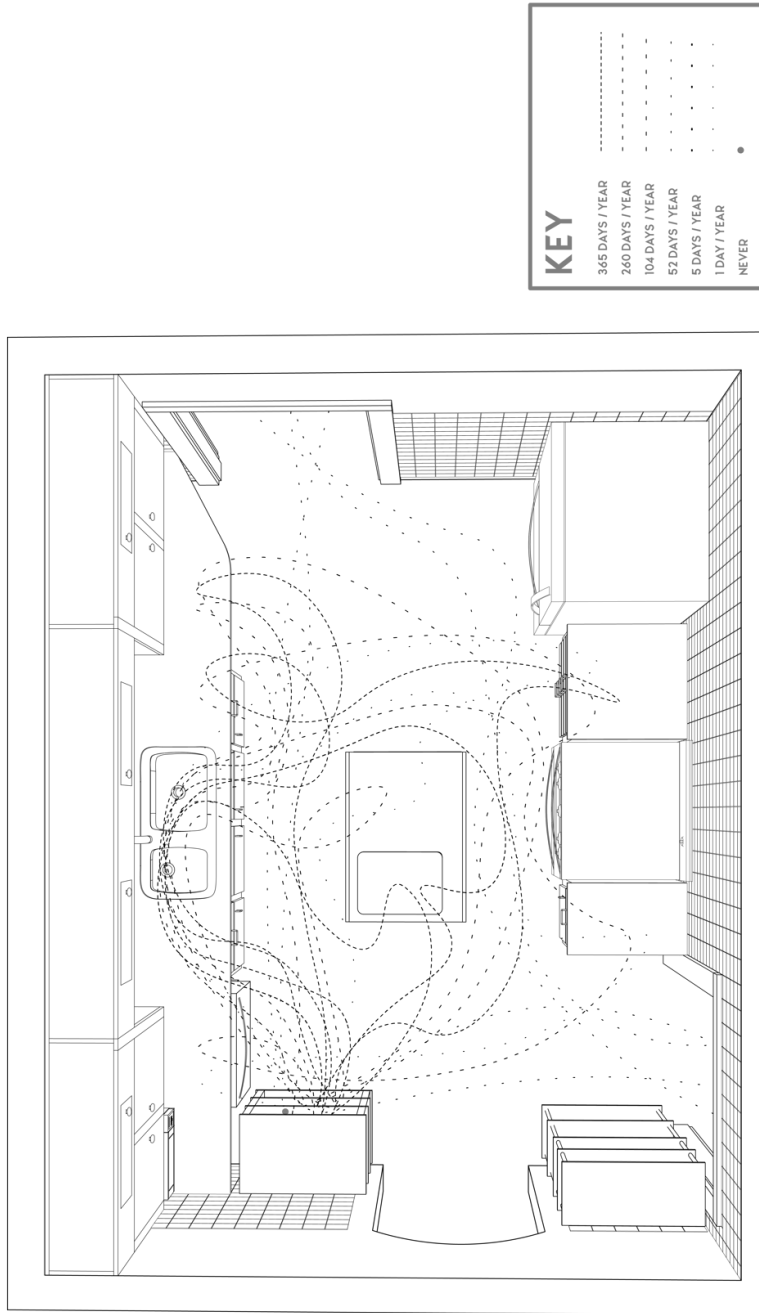[12] John Archer, Architecture and Suburbia

Figure 3: Kitchen Traces

scratch as it is purely "an individual personal characteristic, that is, [...] something ontologically prior to the social realm—prior to family, state, and everything else in between."[13] Dwellings likewise became directly connected to "the personal identity of the householder, not only as an indication of selfhood but also as an instrument for the fullest articulation and realization of the self."[14] This was a turning point from the home acting as a canvas upon which an external perception was projected to one upon which one internal perception was projected. In other words, it was the moment at which the home became prosthetized.

Again, in middle of the 20th century, the home became a projection screen as well as a prosthetic. Here one can talk both of the free plan and the all-pervasive influence of mechanization and industrialization, but also postwar wealth as well as intensified definitions and manifestations of "domesticity" and with it, gender roles. Where cookie-cutter floorplans prevailed, furniture and objects became prosthetics, helping American breadwinners and housewives identify themselves as thoroughly modern, practical, stylish, and in-the-know. However, just as in the centuries before, the canvas provided as the backdrop for this domesticity was loaded with intentions and preconceptions; the American Dream required a specific set of behaviors to go with its suburban rancher.

The condition of the 21st century dweller seems to be more complex than even before. Ivan Illich compares the ancient process of human dwelling to what it became in modern times, describing how now a, "resident lives in a world that has been made

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[13] Architecture and Suburbia, "The Apparatus of Selfhood," pg. 94
[14] Architecture and Suburbia, pg. 94

hard. He can no more beat his path on the highway than he can make a hole in the wall. He goes through life without leaving a trace."[15] For Illich, considering the 1960s and 70s, this was true. However, the Digital Age brought with it new methods of leaving traces. The hardscape around us, however, has remained mostly the same. Identity construction has thus become easier and easier in one realm, the global datascape, and increasingly impossible in domesticity's physical realm. Living in a time in which, in Illich's words, "the vernacular space of dwelling is replaced by the homogenous space of the Garage," the task of identity construction has gone digital, and objects have become the projection screen (fig. 4).

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[15] Ivan Illich, Dwelling, http://www.spurse.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/DWELLING.pdf, pg. 40

Figure 4: Strewn Out Domesticity

CHAPTER THREE
SITE CONSIDERATIONS

Public vs. Private

The requirements for a home stand in contrast to the requirements for domesticity. Because the home is the site of identity construction, home can be anywhere identity is constructed. The crucial threshold between home and away has historically been the difference between public and private, which Hannah Arendt observed had become so blurred by the social realm that the distinction was almost impossible to locate. If that was true mid 20th century, then the difference has been almost entirely demolished today. Our new methods of dwelling and constructing identity require new spatial forms and territories, but they need not be completely invented. New territories might very well exist among the familiar quotidian (fig. 5).

Figure 5: 741 N. Broadway

The Wallpaper Subjectivity

Although it is difficult to understand the origins of and motivations behind these new domestic modes, Neil Leach helps shed light on this subjectivity, which he argues is specific to our precise time in history. Leach gives it the name, "the Wallpaper Person," and describes it as a postmodern reboot of Georg Simmel's "blasé individual," or the "pleasure-seeking amnesiac of today, in constant search of gratification of the most ephemeral kind and blinkered by its own aestheticized outlook to the social inequalities of the world outside."[16] Leach's Wallpaper Person, who each of us arguably is, possesses what can now be termed a Feral Domesticity. It knows no boundaries and can be both here and there simultaneously. It is not confined to what generations before us would have defined as normal. It is ephemeral and does not currently have a tangible form. This poses a huge opportunity for 21st century designers.

A subjectivity so reliant on object prosthesis naturally requires an equally accommodating spatial prosthetic. As the plan libre left behind by the Modernists will no longer suffice, the search for the spatial counterpart in this relationship must begin in the city, where, of course, the Wallpaper Person feels most at home. In addition to the free plan, another leftover of the 20th century is an abundance of abandoned industrial and commercial spaces sprinkled throughout the urban landscape. Coopting these spaces on behalf of the Wallpaper Person is the first task in rooting a Feral Domesticity.

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[16] Neil Leach, "Wallpaper* Person: Notes on the Behaviour of a New Species," 232.

CHAPTER FOUR

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

"A possibility offers itself for making explicit the relation of theory to the procedures from which it results and to those which are its objects: a discourse composed of stories."

Michel de Certeau, Practice of Everyday Life[17]

The domestic realm must now be incredibly individualistic. The individual must shape the character and form of the home as much as the home shapes the individual. The act of storytelling seems particularly appropriate here. In order to understand the way a spatial prosthesis might work, one must understand the paths that lead to it as well as the objects it produces. This process begins with a study of three domestic objects and they ways in which they are prosthetized. The first, a collection of knives, represents the digital subject's ability to instantly become an expert at whatever he or she might take an interest in today (fig. 6). For the wellness addict, who quells every impending existential crisis with supplements, oils, and crystals, the second is the high-end beauty tool, a jade roller, which, when rolled across the face, helps to stimulate the lymphatic system (fig. 7). And of course, for the budding social media influencer, or just someone in search of that next kick of Instagram gratification, an outsize wardrobe (fig. 8).

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[17] Michel de Certeau. *The Practice of Everyday Life.* Univ. of California Press, 2013.

Figure 6: Chef's Knife, WPP_K

Figure 7: Jade Roller, WPP_B

Figure 8: Wire Hanger, WPP_W

Each of these is a prosthetic, identity prop, or portal into a world made possible by an individual's digital identity, and each of these grows into a narrative that, when played out at a one-to-one scale in the city, helps lend spatial characteristics to their ephemerality. Borrowing from Guy Debord and the Situationists, these three narratives become the basis for three psycho-geographical dérives through North Knoxville, Tennessee.[18] The process of mapping these journeys begins to suggest how each Feral Domesticity might take root in the remains of 741 N. Broadway (figs. 9 – 12). This is one example of the many outcomes that might arise from a latepostmodern approach to inhabiting urban leftovers. When the digital subject moves through the city, walls and ceilings become more of a suggestion than a boundary. Apertures that offer unexpected views and adjacencies become the focus and the primary rule-makers. Translating these parameters into the scale of a building reveals new ways to arrange domestic space that ignore outdated assumptions and bypass built-in templates. The Wallpaper Person is home.

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[18] https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/theory.html

Figure 9: Map of Dérives

Figure 10: Dérive WPP_B

Figure 11: Dérive WPP_K

Figure 12: Dérive WPP_W

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Lindsay Elizabeth Clark is a designer, writer, and native of Knoxville, Tennessee. She graduated from the University of Tennessee Knoxville in 2013 with a bachelor's degree in German & World Business. In the final year of her undergraduate studies, she lived in Mannheim, Germany where she took classes at the Duale-Hochschule Baden-Württemberg, completed an internship within the Communications department of Mercedes-Benz EvoBus, and nurtured a growing interest in cultural history and architecture. She turned this interest into a career path in 2015, when she began the Master of Architecture program in the University of Tennessee's College of Architecture and Design. Three years later, her interests have developed and the questions she asks now are more complex than ever before. Following graduation in May 2018, she plans to continue her speculative research while working to improve her hometown through critical observation and thoughtful design.