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# Middlesex and the Biopolitics of Modernist Architecture

Nicole Seymour

*California State University, Fullerton*

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NICOLE SEYMOUR

## ***Middlesex and the Biopolitics of Modernist Architecture***

There comes a point in *Middlesex*—page 258, to be exact—when the reader realizes that the title refers not, or at least not only, to the intersex status of narrator-protagonist Cal Stephanides, but also to a street: the street that, as of 1967, the Stephanides family lives on in the Detroit suburb of Grosse Pointe. Middlesex is also, by way of metonym, a house: the modernist abode in which the family lives. (All this becomes clear after Cal exclaims, in the eponymously-titled chapter in question, “Middlesex! Did anybody ever live in a house as strange?” [Eugenides 258]) Indeed, when one learns that Middlesex Boulevard is a real street in Grosse Pointe, and that Eugenides himself grew up in two modernist houses there, one might wonder if the novel began not with the idea of an intersex protagonist but with the idea of a house.

I want to pursue this idea of a house, beginning with the observation that modernist architecture is one of the major technologies of modernity treated in the novel, alongside automation and sexology. *Middlesex* gestures broadly toward the role of modernist infrastructure in the rise of Detroit and its auto industry, tracking the eventual decline of all three (see Blanchard in this special cluster). Moreover, what architecture, automation, and sexology have in common is the organization of bodies. I therefore understand architecture as a matter of biopolitics, in the Foucauldian sense of administering, optimizing, and regulating human life (Foucault, *Will*). However, we must also note that the Stephanides’ home is one of the few structures in the novel that does not decay but is in fact continually updated. Additionally, as I will describe, modernist architecture often works against the exploitative effects of automation and sexology. Thus, it constitutes a complex and even contradictory force in processes of modernization, and in the novel itself.

Before going further, we must establish a few points about both the Stephanides’ house and architectural history. The house was built in 1909 and exemplifies the “Prairie Style,” an early mode of modernist architecture developed most famously by Frank Lloyd Wright. The so-called “Prairie School” of architects developed “an ‘organic’ approach to design, which sought to bind a building to its site and its distinctive, regional landscape” (Moor 6). This style was distinguished by horizontal lines and massing, flat or low-pitched roofs with overhanging eaves, and windows grouped into horizontal bands—all of which evoked the wide, long and low horizons of the Midwest—and embraced the blurring of indoors and outdoors so quintessential to modernist architecture at large. As Cal sums it up, the home’s (fictional) architect “Hudson Clark . . . had designed Middlesex to harmonize with the natural surroundings. [He] followed

the principles of Frank Lloyd Wright, banishing the Victorian vertical in favor of a Midwestern horizontal, opening up the interior spaces, and bringing in a Japanese influence” (258).

Importantly, like other modernist architectural approaches, the Prairie School reacted against Greek and Roman classicism, which is relevant not only in terms of the Stephanides’ Greek heritage, but also vis-à-vis the most memorable iteration of classical architecture in the novel: the cheesy columns of “Hercules Hot Dogs,” the family’s restaurant chain. As architectural historian H. Allen Brooks once declared, the Prairie School created “the most original architecture that America has ever known” (ix). In this way, then, the house represents the family’s “successful” Americanization as much as anything else. (Similarly, in this special cluster, Sandilands argues that the mulberry tree outside the house serves to naturalize the family.) But it does much more. In what follows, I outline four ways of understanding the role of architecture in Eugenides’s novel.

To begin with, the Stephanides’ house contradicts Eugenides’s own plotting work. *Middlesex* relies heavily on foreshadowing, dramatic irony, and notions of fate: nods, perhaps, to the Greek tragedies that form part of the family’s cultural heritage. We regularly encounter such statements as “General Hajienestis . . . will later proceed to his death in Athens” and, as Cal describes his classmates’ pubertal transformations, “deadlines encoded in the species are met” (88, 286). Similarly, as Breu observes in this special cluster, Eugenides makes Cal’s intersex status biologically predetermined. But if the novel’s architecture, as it were, is thus relentlessly teleological, the house is not: Cal tells us that, for Hudson Clark, “[t]he concept of stairs in the traditional sense was . . . something the world no longer needed. Stairs represented a teleological view of the universe, of one thing leading to another, whereas now everyone knew that one thing didn’t lead to another but often nowhere at all” (258). While the house does in fact contain stairs, various shelves and landings distract and divert the climber. In short, the house breaks out of pre-set form and design, something Eugenides’s plot never achieves.<sup>1</sup>

Second, the house in *Middlesex* indexes sensitive issues of sex, gender, and family. Its open floor plan, lack of closets (!), and play with inside/outside, privacy/exposure speak to our protagonist’s humiliating medical exams and public scrutiny, but also to his self-acceptance and coming out to love interest Julie Kikuchi. (Following Kojima in this special cluster, we could implicate Julie in the aforementioned architectural notion of “Japanese influence.”) As Cal recalls, the stairway walls had peepholes that allowed one to spy on family members below; his mother, baffled by the kitchen’s separation from the family room, also complains, “‘how am I supposed to find curtains for th[e] windows? They don’t make curtains that big. Everyone can see right in!’ ‘Think of it this way,’” Cal’s father responds: “‘We can see right out’” (259). The modernist home thus disrupts traditional patterns and roles, and also counters the sexological gaze.

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<sup>1</sup> This tension, of course, does not necessarily constitute an aesthetic failing. Indeed, we might say that Eugenides’s interest in plot is a metatextual element of his novels—as seen perhaps most obviously in his latest, *The Marriage Plot* (2011).

Third, and related, the novel invokes architecture as a biopolitical force that, like automation and sexology, organizes bodies and draws out their “potential.” We see the disturbing biopolitics of automation when Cal’s grandfather goes to work on the auto assembly line, and in descriptions of Black foundrymen with no time “even to pick the burning bits of metal from their arms” (96). But the house represents human potential more utopically or, perhaps, heterotopically, to invoke Foucault yet again (“Of Other Spaces”). Alongside the affined Arts and Crafts movement, the Prairie School embraced handcrafting as a reaction against dehumanizing mass manufacture. Indeed, Frank Lloyd Wright’s utopic musings—in his houses, “[i]nterior spaciousness began to dawn,” both spiritually and in terms of square footage, and he imagined himself as part of “the better building of men in a better way” (Wright 143, 326)—chime closely with Cal’s own on the novel’s last page: “Middlesex was . . . a place with few interior walls . . . a place designed for a new type of human being, who would inhabit a new world. I couldn’t help feeling, of course, that that person was me, me and all the others like me” (Eugenides 529). Built in 1909, Middlesex not only proves relevant to Cal here in 1975, but also gestures further into the future.

Finally, I propose the house in *Middlesex* as an instance of what we might call “intersex ecology” or “intersex architectonics.” Here, I take inspiration from architectural theorist and transgender studies scholar Lucas Crawford—who, with an archive that ranges from Virginia Woolf’s modernist novel *Orlando* to New York City’s High Line park, shows us how architecture enables and/or constrains non-normative expressions of sex and gender.<sup>2</sup> Most relevant to my purposes here, Crawford demonstrates how Woolf’s eponymous protagonist, rather than possessing a “discrete gender identity,” shifts and develops their gender in relationship with their house: a house that, like Middlesex, is always being updated (“Woolf” 167). Thus, we must ask: if “people stopped being human in 1913” when Henry Ford introduced the assembly line, what does it mean that a handcrafted, harmonious-with-nature home ushers in not only a “new type of human,” but an intersex one at that (Eugenides 95)? While humans like Cal share with queer and trans populations the biopolitical experiences of medicalization and pathologization, Middlesex—as status, as street, as structure, and as story—points us to the role of the built environment in the unique articulation of *intersex* identity and embodiment.

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<sup>2</sup> See Crawford’s book *Transgender Architectonics: The Shape of Change in Modernist Space*, which includes a version of the Woolf article cited herein.

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**NICOLE SEYMOUR** is Associate Professor of English at California State University, Fullerton. Her first book, *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination*, won the 2015 Ecocriticism Book Award from the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment. Her latest book, *Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age*, will be released by the University of Minnesota Press in October 2018.