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Alistair Fair on supporting transformation

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‘...how, since the eighteenth century, queer people have created and appropriated spaces, buildings, and places ...’

‘...the plural in the title of the work is key ...’

Alistair Fair on supporting transformation

Queer Spaces: An Atlas of LGBTQIA+ Places & Stories

Edited by Adam Nathaniel Furman and Joshua Mardell

London: RIBA Publishing, 2022

240 pp.

516 colour illustrations

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Reviewed by Alistair Fair

Queer Spaces: An Atlas of LGBTQIA+ Places & Stories, edited by Adam Nathaniel Furman and Joshua Mardell, is a landmark work in the history of architecture and the city. Bringing together some fifty contributors to discuss almost one hundred buildings and sites (and a few unbuilt projects), this global survey offers a much-needed and diverse overview of the ways in which, since the eighteenth century, queer people have created and appropriated spaces, buildings, and places, for a diverse range of uses from the intensely personal to the highly public. The book’s title is clearly deliberate. Although it has echoes of Aaron Betsky’s seminal *Queer Space: Architecture and Same-Sex Desire*,¹ the plural in the title of the current work - ‘spaces’ - is key. Whereas Betsky’s title implied a singular ‘queer space’, Furman and Mardell are concerned to highlight a range of voices and perspectives, from around the globe.

For the editors of this volume, queer spaces have a fundamental significance: they are ‘places where you can express yourself without fear or shame’.² Olivia Laing’s foreword quotes the lyrics to the Pet Shop Boys’ song ‘Being boring’ in support of this idea: ‘I never dreamt that I would get to be / the creature that I meant to be’, representing what Laing calls ‘the idea of a hidden self, a mysterious creature that can emerge from its chrysalis, given the right conditions.’³ Queer spaces are thus the ‘ecosystem’ that supports this transformation, ranging from buildings designed to support particular ways of living, to subversive, perhaps transient appropriations and adaptations of the built environment.

Discussions of queer architecture and urbanism have emerged in print since the 1990s but, though ground-breaking and essential, have often been narrowly focused in terms of place, ethnicity, and gender.⁴ In contrast, *Queer Spaces* provides a welcome contrast, being broad and inclusive, scholarly yet also accessible. In this

respect, the book is not a work of theory, unlike, say, the closely argued analytical approach of Betsky's earlier study.

The editors adopt a tripartite structure, considering in turn 'domestic', 'communal', and 'public' spaces. Each example is given two (sometimes four) well-illustrated pages; each text is succinct, punchy, and well-informed. No attempt is made to standardise the contributors' approach, but this is one of the book's many strengths, presenting on equal terms accounts by historians, artists, architects and curators from around the world.

The initial selection of 'domestic' spaces is typical of the book's broad scope, taking as its subject a range of 'alternative domesticities'. They include purpose-designed homes, such as 'Dracula's Den' in Chiba, Japan, a top-lit, open-plan house whose introversion (with no windows or doors in a conventional sense) contrasts with the fluid interior layout, in which spaces and functions are blurred. Fonthill Abbey, Wiltshire (1793-1813) was conceived as a refuge for its patron, a place of 'waiting and suffering', while 'A la Ronde', in Devon (c. 1796) formed a space in which women's achievements could be celebrated. Familiar typologies are revisited: a terrace of two-up, two-down terraced houses in Sheffield stands for the everyday environments inhabited by working-class queer people. Some domestic spaces are communal, such as the building in Dhaka, Bangladesh which is inhabited by a hijra community – that is, a group who, though assigned male at birth, do not identify as such and may be trans, intersex, or gender non-conforming. Other spaces are resolutely private: not only the 'Dragon's Den', noted above, but also such examples as the houses 1930s-70s Britain shared by Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland, which, as Jane Stevenson argues, were 'distinctively lesbian' in their concern with privacy as well as the way that the houses accommodated a range of 'totemic objects, symbols and souvenirs of an intensely shared life'.⁵

The second section of the book documents an imaginative diversity of spaces in which queer communities have been formed, from nightclubs and bars to artists' studios, community centres and bookshops. Some of these spaces are imagined: 'Stalled!', for example, is a prototype gender-neutral restroom offering a range of types of space. The Scottish Architecture Fringe festival, meanwhile, commissioned designs for a queer nightclub, camouflaged within a central city block.

The final part of the book embraces the public sphere. There is some overlap here with the types of space discussed in the book's second part, as there are further examples of institutional buildings, yet there are also plentiful explorations of how the urban environment can support queer life in other, sometimes unexpected ways. Moscow's former Central V.I. Lenin Museum was something of a cruising ground between the 1940s and the 1990s, while the last carriage on subway trains in Mexico City has long been appropriate as a place of safety and encounter by the LGBTQ+ community.

Several themes connect the examples. Although some queer spaces have been long-lasting or deliberately memorialising, such as Amsterdam's Homomonument (which commemorates homosexual victims of the Nazis), many represent a degree of transience – perhaps most literally Fonthill Abbey, which collapsed in a storm. Some of the examples are deliberately fleeting, 'pop up' venues, offering a moment of respite and sanctuary in repressive contexts. Other examples involve temporary, even individual appropriations of space, such as the opening example, Ailo Ribas' description of a train journey with personal meaning. Some exist in cyberspace, such as online Zoom parties. Even apparently long-lasting examples can be characterised by transience. The heritage authorities in England have recently designated London's Royal Vauxhall Tavern – a pub which has long had a queer clientele, and has hosted acclaimed drag performances since the 1970s – as a structure of historic

interest, offering the building a degree of protection. Yet even then, its future remains vulnerable, as the building is for sale at a price beyond the immediate reach of the community. The building may be protected; the use is not.

Many of the examples in the book involve the creative – and sometimes subversive – adaptation of existing buildings. For example, as Elizabeth Darling discusses, 'Finella', an eighteenth-century house in Cambridge, was in the late 1920s reworked by the don Mansfield Forbes and the architect Raymond McGrath. It gained a sequence of dramatic interiors whose design – making novel use of materials that were understood to be modern, such as plywood – drew on the story of the tenth-century Scottish queen Finella (understood as Forbes' alter ego), as well as other moments in queer history and Pictish mythology. The building was effectively 'queered': it was subverted and transformed in innovative, unexpected, even camp ways. It offers a useful counterpart to the sobriety (and sometimes also the austerity) of other early modernist works.

Politics and power, too, run through many of the examples. Numerous have been closed at the behest of those in authority, such as the Centro Cultural Guanaca in Nicaragua, an inclusive environment which was forced to shut its doors in 2021. Yet such examples can also embody resistance: the Centro Cultural Guanaca's façade has been repainted since its closure as a statement of defiance. Similarly, after the authorities in Mexico City attempted in 2011 to prevent the use of the rear subway carriages at night, protests saw them reopened. In 1980s London, the Greater London Council (GLC) was more supportive. Its deliberately inclusive approach led it to support financially such ventures as the Black Lesbian and Gay Centre, and the London Lesbian and Gay Centre, in a deliberate riposte to the homophobia of the then-UK government, whose irritation with the GLC's policies led it to abolish the council.

While some of the examples represent intensely personal spaces and experiences, others demonstrate the significance of networks. In 1920s Cambridge, 'Finella' accommodated meetings of those dedicated to modern art, architecture and design, laying foundations for the key modernist networks of the 1930s. In London, meanwhile, the Cave of Harmony – a club which occupied three sites in its eight-year existence – drew a progressive audience from the queer community and beyond. Such examples offer a revised view of modernism in inter-war Britain which foregrounds its queer roots and which could productively be further developed in future work.⁶

One of the core ambitions of the book is to take aim at architectural history as it might conventionally be understood. The editors note that 'growing up queer means experiencing the de-stabilising absence of a broad and accessible queer history', not least as far as architecture and the built environment are concerned.⁷ For various reasons, including historic or contemporary repression, designers' sexualities have often been played down or glossed-over. As Alan Powers pointed out more than two decades ago, 'gay modernist architects, such as Herbert Tayler and David Green, felt compelled to remain silent about this important aspect of their creativity and social mission'.⁸ Though important strides have been made to start to reveal the queer history of the built environment – not least by many of the contributors to *Queer Spaces* – much remains to be done.

Furthermore, architectural history and contemporary criticism have often foregrounded and valued particular ideals, such as strength and heroism, to the detriment of works which apparently lack these qualities. For example, the decorative (and often fun) style of the 1951 Festival of Britain has at times been unfairly seen as the inferior inverse of the New Brutalism that subsequently appeared, with some critics of the Festival Style using labels such as 'delicate' or

seeing it in terms of an undesirable effeminacy.⁹ In apparent contrast, Brutalism has often been associated positively with such qualities as honesty, boldness and even muscularity. This sort of juxtaposition gains a particular resonance in view of the fact that the 1950s was a decade in which gay men in Britain were particularly subjected to prosecution: the apparent 'effeminacy' of the Festival Style represented a loaded critique. A queer re-reading might not only productively re-balance the picture and allow new understandings to emerge, but also contribute usefully to wider critiques of the culture of architectural education and practice in the present.¹⁰

The issue here is not just one of correcting omissions, or considering the ways in which architecture is described and valued, but also involves consideration of how architectural history itself is practised, as Kit Heyam notes in a discussion of Knockaloe internment camp.¹¹ Used during the First World War and subsequently dismantled, the camp accommodated some internees who lived full-time as female, using female pronouns and wearing female-coded clothing. Various possible motivations have been suggested by historians, but there is little direct evidence on which to draw. Heyam points to the need for a 'queer approach, which seeks to make space for trans possibilities while refusing to definitively fix the internees in modern identity categories'. Heyam also notes that historians' typical wish for 'personal testimony and/or certainty of motivation' – something that can lead to the erasure of histories, not least trans histories, where such evidence is lacking.

A final observation brings us back to the book title. As well as foregrounding the diversity of queer spaces, the subtitle – 'An Atlas of LGBTQIA+ Places & Stories' – usefully highlights the users of these spaces. This book is ultimately one about human experience, and the ways in which the built environment can support, enable and enliven that experience in often testing circumstances. In this respect, it deserves a central place in architectural education and practice.

References

- ¹ Aaron Betsky, *Queer Space: Architecture and Same-Sex Desire* (New York: William Morrow, 1997)
- ² Adam Nathaniel Furman and Joshua Mardell, 'Introduction', in *Queer Spaces: An Atlas of LGBTQIA+ Places and Stories* (London: RIBA Publishing, 2022), pp. x-xi.
- ³ Olivia Laing, 'Foreword', *Ibid.*, pp. viii-ix.
- ⁴ A useful reading list may be found on Historic England's 'Pride of Place' website, <https://historicengland.org.uk/research/inclusive-heritage/lgbtq-heritage-project/reading-list/> (accessed 10 June 2022).
- ⁵ Jane Stevenson, "'Miss Green", "Ye Olde Communists' Rest" and "Riversdale"', in *Queer Spaces*, ed. by Furman and Mardell, pp. 32-33.
- ⁶ See e.g. Gregory Woods, *Homintern: How Gay Culture Liberated the Modern World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).
- ⁷ Furman and Mardell, 'Introduction', p. x.
- ⁸ Alan Powers, 'The Expression of Levity', *Twentieth Century Architecture* 5 (2001), pp. 49-56 (p. 53).
- ⁹ Reyner Banham borrowed a contemporary description from Lionel Brett for the title of an essay in 1976. See Reyner Banham, 'The Style: "Flimsy ... Effeminate"?' , in *A Tonic to the Nation: the Festival of Britain 1951*, ed. by Mary Banham and Bevis Hillier (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), pp. 190-98; for discussion of this, see Powers, 'The Expression of Levity'.
- ¹⁰ For one example in contemporary architectural education, see Howlett Brown, 'The Bartlett School of Architecture: Environmental Investigation', https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/sites/bartlett/files/the_bartlett_school_of_architecture_environmental_investigation_report_june_2022p_6.pdf (accessed 10 June 2022).

¹¹ Kit Heyam, 'Former Knockaloe Internment Camp', in *Queer Spaces*, ed. by Furman and Mardell, pp. 6-7.

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Competing interests

The author declares none.

Author's biography

Alistair Fair is Reader in Architectural History at the University of Edinburgh. His books include *Modern Playhouses: An Architectural History of Britain's New Theatres, 1945-1985* (2018), and *Peter Moro and Partners* (2021).

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CAPTIONS

1. London Lesbian and Gay Centre newsletter, November 1988: cover with cartoon section by graphic artist NINE, who worked on various publications linked to the centre
2. Centro Cultural Guanaca: the mural on the front façade
3. Graffiti on the Mexico subway: 'Carlos, I know that you will read this someday. I want you to know that despite the distance, you will always be in my mind and in my heart. Sincerely, Edgar'