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Citation for published version:

Hollis, E 2015, 'Review of Bachelors of a Different Sort: Queer aesthetics, material culture and the modern interior in Britain by John Potvin', *The Journal of Architecture*, vol. 20, no. 2, pp. 356-369.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2015.1028742>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/13602365.2015.1028742](https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2015.1028742)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

The Journal of Architecture

Publisher Rights Statement:

©Hollis, E. (2015). Bachelors of a Different Sort: Queer aesthetics, material culture and the modern interior in Britain. *The Journal of Architecture*, 20(2), 356-369. 10.1080/13602365.2015.1028742

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BACHELORS OF A DIFFERENT SORT: Queer Aesthetics, Material Culture and the Modern Interior in Britain

REVIEW

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Introduction

John Potvin begins *Bachelors of a Different Sort* on an intimate note. He has just got married, he tells us, in the home in which he now lives with his husband. They have ceased to be bachelors.

Let me make a confession of my own. I winced when I read that introduction. Not because it was infelicitous, but because I, too have made a home with a man, and we are remain bachelors of a different sort, because we are not married.

It confuses people quite as much as if we were; but it was so different for so long that, for my boyfriend (we still call each other that, deep into middle age) the promised land of marital bliss seems like too alien a Canaan for us to enter.

Bachelors of a Different Sort tells the story of men who did not have the choices Potvin or I enjoy today. Instead they described themselves (without I the contemporary scholarly baggage around the word) as 'queer'.

Call them artistic, or a theatrical, or, as I once heard it put 'of the Athenian persuasion': they possessed great talents – in art, or the theatre, or exceptional wealth and taste as collectors.

They used these talents to create homes for themselves and it is these homes that are the ostensible subject of this book, for they, without children to mess them up, or women to tidy them, were queer sorts of places, too.

Glamour aside, this is not a glossy coffee table book; and that is not just due to the economies of academic publishing. Histories of home are always problematic, most usually because their subject isn't there to photograph any more.

As Potvin notes, Penny Sparke and Susi McKellar 'have importantly argued that there is a disjunction between heavy documented idealized interiors and ephemeral and poorly documented *lived-in* interiors' (P. Sparke and S. McKellar (eds.) *Interior Design and Identity* (Manchester MUP, 2004) p.2 quoted in Potvin p.6)

Visual documents would be unreliable anyway, for as Charles Rice writes in his historiography of domestic space *The Emergence of the Interior*: 'visual representations of interiors are not simply transparent to spatial referents, even if such spatial referents exist; representations construct interiors on a two dimensional surface as much as practices of decoration and furnishing construct interiors spatially' (C. Rice *The Emergence of the Interior* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007) p. 19 quoted in Potvin p. 7); and

But the interiors that form the subject of this book present a further problem. They are queer interiors, and as such, they doubly pass under the radar. What they represent, and how, is in itself a hidden history.

All too often, the story of the (male) homosexual has been written as one of chance encounters in public places, and it has been assumed that the homosexual man is, of his nature, fundamentally alone. It has been a story that is easy to construct in an age before gay marriage or even cohabitation was socially acceptable; and it is a story from which domestic life has largely been absent.

Potvin challenges that omission, quoting Halberstam: 'if we try to think about queerness as outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices, we detach queerness from sexual identity and come close to understand [Michel] Foucault's comment in 'Friendship as a way of life' that homosexuality threatens people as a 'way of life' rather than a way of having sex.' J. Halberstam *Female Masculinities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 1998) p. 1 quoted in Potvin p. 9) Instead, he writes, 'we must ask ourselves what are the aesthetic, cultural, social, and political implications of interweaving one's life with another person of the same sex?' (Potvin p.10)

Potvin's bachelors occupy an England between 1875 and 1957, between the passing of the Labouchere amendment and the Wolfenden Report. The former criminalized homosexual acts not just in public places, but in private homes too. How queer men behaved, and decorated, their parlours needed to be, in this period as closely coded as their behaviour in public.

And it was coded very differently to the way that gay men visualize themselves today. This book, writes 'views queer identity and queer space as neither limited to sex acts, orgasm and genital pleasure, not the outcome of a shaming closet, a post Stonewall concept which had no bearing on the actual lived experiences of men and women prior to the second world war.' (Potvin p. 25)

It was a world hidden in another way too, in which the distinction between the sexes was much more clearly cut than our own. As a result, Potvin argues that men found themselves alienated from the feminised activities of home making and 'turned to alternative spaces and sought out venues in which homosociability was welcomed, celebrated, and even expected.' (Potvin p.13).

That was in the expectation that home (with its attendant family) would always be waiting for them after a day at work, or the club; what was to happen if there was no such place, because the man was a bachelor?

The necessity of making a home did not disappear, and it set a paradoxical problem. Potvin quotes Thad Logan, who says that decoration announces 'the home's difference from the public world, to mark its separation from the marketplace, to mask the fact of [its] participation in the narrative of capitalism.' (T. Logan *The Victorian Parlour* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2001) p. 204, quoted in Potvin p.15) How, then should men decorate their homes-as-refuges, so closely enmeshed in that public world, that marketplace, in the narratives of capital as they were?

The bachelors of a different sort whose lives and homes are narrated in this book were 'astute collectors, men who sought to redefine the parameters of domestic life and fashion' (Potvin p. 17) in houses that were expensive, filled with beautiful and luxurious things, and arranged (especially since all of these men were artists or connoisseurs) with a keen eye.

That they balanced the demands of public capital and domestic seclusion in this way was threatening, strange, and defiant, and Potvin structures this book by according to each of the homes he describes a 'deadly sin'. These sins, hovering as they do between the desirable and the wicked, ironise a 'constant tension between resistance and shame' (Potvin p.27). The interior lives they frame form 'the site of a social and intellectual polemic in a neo-conservative age of naming, assimilating, and ultimately repressing difference through subtle acts, modes, and apparatus of shaming into submission' (Potvin p. 29)

First comes of the sin of idolatry – and in particular the cult of the diva. Nowadays it might be Judy, or Cher, but for Lord Gower in the second half of the nineteenth century it was Marie Antoinette, for he filled his home with bric-a-brac relating to the life of that tragic queen. Gower, the scion of an ancient house, but inexplicably childless, created a house-museum containing 'talismanic objects...that provided a sense of attachment with the past and its luminaries, tragic or otherwise' (Potvin p.59). Tragic it was: he was forced to sell his Antoinettalia in the end as clouds of scandal gathered around his reputation towards the end of his life.

The homes shared by the painters Charles Shannon and Charles Ricketts must be discovered more obliquely, for 'respectable bourgeois domesticity, even if queer, is easily silenced by history' (Potvin p.122). Living in 'decadent simplicity and grand austerity' (Potvin p.101), the couple, while they were devoted, never admitted to a sexual liaison. Lacking the luxurious gloom of the homo homes of contemporary popular imagination, their houses were filled with light, apparently respectable. Only later 'distanced and removed from Wilde's prison sentence, near the end of his own life, and yet not too far distant from a generation of the sting's effect.' (Potvin p. 121) did Ricketts' publication of *Oscar Wilde: Recollections* bear witness to the love that dare not speak its name.

No such discretion afflicted the next couples whose domestic lives are recounted in the next section, entitled 'Country Living'.

Edward Warren was a committed 'Uranian' that is, a follower of the writings of Karl Heinrich Ulrich, the first writer to make ideological claims for same-sex relations between men. However, this should not be confused with the contemporary gay rights agenda – Ulrich's model was Ancient Greece; and Warren's home at Lewes in Sussex was called 'Thebes' to honour the Sacred Band of that ancient city, whose love led them to fight and die for one another in battle, and it was filled with sculpture and art celebrating the Greek Ideal. Warren's sin was, Potvin argues, 'askesis' that is ascetic training of the body and mind to an unnatural degree. It is an ideal still alive and well today in the body fascism of contemporary gay life. However his own relationships were more complex, and in a way, sadder. John Marshall (he called him 'Puppy') acted (in public anyway) as his 'secretary' but left him, in the end, to marry.

No such self-discipline afflicted the chaotic country houses of Sir Cedric Morris and Arthur Lett-Haines: 'Floors were also scarcely visible through the mounds of bottles and saucers for the numerous house pets as well as the ancient Aga long past its glory days. One could equally find 'woolen underwear steeping in bowls.' (Potvin p.185), and the two would regularly stage spectacular rows in front of the art students with which they filled the house in the summer to teach flower painting and still life. Their sin, writes Potvin, was that of being domestic and decorative, and it was precisely these aspects of their work 'that would lead art historians and critics to write Morris and his companion out of the canon of British modern art' (Potvin p. 168) preferring instead the austere, butch certainties of avant-garde modernism.

It is in the final section of the book that Modernism itself must make its appearance; but in this story, queer subverts even the eternal verities of modernism; and Potvin attributes to Noel Coward and his homes that most queer, and most modern (-e rather than -ist) of vices: Glamour. Widely published in the celebrity mags, bleached at the hand of the decorator Syrie Maugham, but void of the stern moralities of Le Corbusier, Coward's homes were airbrushed media products, to whose sleek surfaces no imputation of aberration could adhere. His 'queer time and space were firmly rooted in the present, a whitewashed surface meant to obscure any (leftover) filth or debris of times long past.' writes Potvin, '... and as such [Coward's modern home] fulfills the modernist drive to destroy that which came before.' (Potvin p.212)

Gower was a sentimental old queen, or at least adored one, Shannon and Ricketts serious-minded aesthetes, Warren and Marshall idealists, Morris and Lett Haines chaotic *bon viveurs*, Coward a smooth performer, but it is in the final character in the story that we encounter perhaps the most recognizable pantomime dame of the piece, Cecil Beaton, and the sin of artifice. His *trianon* at Ashcombe, with its classical urns and candy cane columns and Tyrolean costumes is the definitive camp interior – whether intentionally or no Potvin explores with sympathy. He quotes Susan Sontag: 'it's not a lamp but a "lamp" ... to perceive Camp in objects and persons is to

understand Being-as-playing-a-role' (Sontag, Notes on Camp p.280 quoted in Potvin p.270) and associates Beaton's flamboyance with a strongly felt and continuous sense of shame, as well as defiance, about his sexuality.

This last character in the story brings us to the modern notion of the closet, and Potvin concludes his account to write: 'The so called closet as an open secret folds upon itself and marks a space of 'knowing by not knowing'. It becomes the very apparatus of artifice that inadvertently exposes the hidden truths that supposedly lurk below; it is the very thing that allows queer material culture to be staged.' (Potvin p.267)

This is an ambitious weaving of hidden histories – those of the interior, those of men, and those of queer people. It draws relationships that have largely been 'ignored in accounts of sexuality and space, which have concentrated on the public manifestations of male sexuality rather than domestic ones. The result is a sort of reification of the public/private divide by scholars...who, through a collective silence, render the home seemingly unintelligible, feminine, and inconsequential.' (Potvin p. 26).

It is also filled with very human insight. Cecil Beaton stands at the locked bedroom door of the man he hoped would become his lover, red eyed and lip quivering. Ricketts is the intense Svengali to the blond boy Shannon long after the curly hair has fallen away. Arthur Lett Haines sulks in bed while Cedric Morris hides among his irises in the garden. Only, perhaps, Warren, enshrouded in austere ideology, and Coward, so smooth, so mediated, fail to speak to us so directly.

Their homes are harder to imagine, constructed as they are of fragmentary accounts. I found myself unsure for example, about Rickett's and Shannon's home – one the one hand presented as lustrous *wunderkammer*, and on the other described as so simple that they would entertain friends to dinner in the kitchen. On the other hand, the mass of documentation about Coward's domestic arrangements feels a little underused – what did people say about it at the time? There is another problem here in that all the characters described are 'creative' people – and sometimes their work is discussed in substitution for and sometimes at the expense of their homes. It would be interesting to imagine a similar account of the homes of queer accountants or factory workers.

One theme that could do with interesting extension is the idea of queer domestic time. Without children and women to regularize them, without 'normal' jobs, when did these men eat, or sleep, or go away? Their homes were almost all temporary arrangements, too – Morris and Lett Haines' a summer affair, packed up when they went away hunting in the winter, Cecil Beaton's Ashcombe a sort of gay Brideshead, to be longed for when lost, Warren's a monument to an unrealized utopia.

There's one other area for further work here that occurs to me, though it falls well beyond the scope of this volume. There's a bachelor of a different sort again, even queerer than these ones, and almost universally reviled. He is Henry James'

monstrous Gilbert Osmond in *Portrait of Lady*, ensconced in a palace of chilly grandeur. He is Rock Hudson, untamed by Doris Day in *Pillow Talk*. He's holding parties at the Heffner mansion long after his sell by date. And after Wolfenden, and the age of consent, and gay marriage and all of that, he's looking stranger and stranger, and more and more worthy of serious study. He is the straight single man.

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