From Conflict to Inclusion in Housing

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Sharing the domestic through ‘residential performance’

Jonathan Orlek

Introduction

This chapter investigates how performance practice collaboratively reimagines and reconfigures domestic space. In doing so it considers the home beyond private concerns. Stealth and performance art practices explore housing relationally and critically, without losing tools and approaches to act architecturally. In response to privatised and atomised living, many ‘residential performances’ are identified which use the intersections of architecture and performance art to collectively perform alternative shared domestic realities.

Ethnography is used as a method for commenting on the quality of these temporary domestic spaces and relationships, by finding meaning in architectural processes, negotiations and dialogues. Collective documentation and self-narratives produced by, and through, the identified residential performances are investigated. This leads to the development of autoethnography as an appropriate research method for residential performance projects. The chapter concludes with a work-in-progress autoethnographic study of OPERA: Open Public Experimental Residential Activity, a residential performance I have initiated with Studio Polpo. OPERA is a programme of sleepover performances to introduce and test sociable residential uses within vacant city-centre locations.
Domestic space and the public sphere

The dominance of the neoliberal world view poses a threat to the idea that society, through collective actions, can shape the way we live. Instead technical procedures tend to ensure that consensus, dictated by the laws of supply and demand, dominates. This concern, rooted within the ‘Right to the City’ movement, views the homogenisation and atomisation of cities as a mechanism for abstracting spaces so that they can be speculated, exchanged and ‘policed’ by capital.

Individuals, whose conditions for living constrict them to consume, also become isolated and atomised. Henri Lefebvre connects this isolation with the production of an ‘abstract space’, extending the Marxist understanding that capitalism abstracts social relations to produce abstract labour. ‘Abstract space’ denies individuals the ability to contribute to the creation of the environment around them by dictating behaviour and spatial organisation according to the laws of supply and demand. Lefebvre points to the ‘lived spaces’ of everyday life – ‘concrete’ social relations – as holding the potential to resist its homogenising logic.

Contemporary articulations of democracy have shifted from a single complete ‘public sphere’ towards a negotiation of multiple competing publics, and a struggle between dominant and counter behaviours. Nancy Fraser suggests that descriptions of a single, rationally articulated and ‘public’ sphere have always been predicated on exclusions, and argues that the domestic is an example of this:

The rhetoric of domestic privacy seeks to exclude some issues and interests from public debate by personalizing and/or familializing them; it casts these as private-domestic or personal-familial matters in contradistinction to public, political matters.

Fraser points to several ‘counterpublics’, including women-only voluntary associations, who have historically used the domestic as a ‘springboard for public activity’. This research draws on Fraser’s reconceptualisation of the public sphere, to ask the questions: Can domestic spaces address collective and civic concerns? Can the production of spaces for eating, sleeping, washing and so on, create forms of living that are not predicated on isolated consumption?
Housing as a ‘matter of concern’

Placing domestic spaces within a contested public sphere requires it to be understood through collective and contingent concerns. The work of Bruno Latour can be used to describe this approach as a shift from private ‘matters of fact’ to collective ‘matters of concern’. For Latour, ‘matters of fact’ emerged from a modern desire to separate objects from subjects, in order to create static incontrovertible material facts. Latour argues that this endeavour has always been an illusion; ‘we have never been modern’. Reconnected with their complicated entanglements, objects have the ability to gather social and material actants around hybrid ‘matters of concern’. Doing so reveals hidden political and spatial geographies:

Each object gathers around itself a different assembly of relevant parties. Each object triggers new occasions to passionately differ and dispute. … In other words, objects – taken as so many issues – bind all of us in ways that map out a public space profoundly different from what is usually recognized under the label of ‘the political’.

Space, therefore, embodies social relations; by creating, conforming to and contesting social relations the objects of architecture are continually made and remade. This demands an understanding that rejects space as an empty container within which the social world can exist and understands it as being inhabited, and performed, by both Cartesian and semiotic objects.

Architectural ‘matters of concern’, such as housing, can no longer be described in their own static, abstracted worlds alone. Defined instead by their complicated entanglements, they must be performed by humans and non-humans, the material and the social, the technical and the symbolic. Architecture, now understood through is consequences, has the ability to assemble concrete social relations, rather than represent abstract constituents, providing an ability to act through everyday spaces, in an otherwise imprisoned Cartesian world. Directed towards the domestic, it transforms a fixed private space, isolated from political life, into something which can connect to public concerns.

Stealth practices

But if the static, abstracted territory of architecture explodes into relational space (if, returning to Latour, ‘matter itself is up for grabs’) how
is architecture best practised, and how do we direct our tools, skills, technical knowledge, representation techniques and so forth towards the making of housing?

The art critic Stephen Wright has pointed to an emergence of practices which use art-related activities rather than art-specific ones. Described as ‘stealth-art’, they exist for specific means and competencies rather than a specific end as an artwork. The practice ‘crops up in the everyday not to aestheticize it, but to inform it.’

Doina Petrescu suggests that these stealth practices might provide a vantage point for architects interested in relational dimensions to spaces.

‘Performance as ‘stealth architecture’

‘Performance architecture’ is an example of how familiar architectural tools and competencies can be used to unfamiliar ends, to inform the spaces of everyday life. The introduction of the term – used to describe practices which connect performance art with architecture – is credited to both Pedro Gadanho and Alex Schweder, two architects who began using it independently of one another in 2007. A growing interest in performance architecture has prompted MoMA to acquire its first ‘Architectural Performance’ (Ikea Disobedients) in 2011 and Tate Britain to host an event titled Performing Architecture in 2013.

Alex Schweder uses performance art to consider architecture in terms of an evolving relationship between subjects and objects, and through open-ended scripts. He argues that ‘through performance and performativity, traditional conceptualisations of architecture can be unpacked, altered, and reconfigured to produce environments where the distinction between the life of the subject and the architectural object becomes productively unclear.’ Although architecture can be understood as a sequence of performances, Schweder suggests that the habit of prescribing fixed programmes prevents this trajectory from being explored. ‘We have to dislodge our habits of thinking about the
way architecture works with the subjectivities that occupy it, from prescriptive (program) to exploratory (performance). Doing so reveals a transformative potential:

[C]onstructing architecture around the way we ‘perform’ it offers its occupants agency in determining who they become in relation to a space and having that space facilitate their desires, hopes, anxieties and needs. Carried out to this concept’s ideal extreme, occupants of buildings become partial authors of their environments as well as producers of their meanings.

Residential performances

There are several projects which use performativity and performance art practices to reinterpret and reconstruct domestic spaces. These ‘residential performances’, defined here, use familiar architectural tools within an expanded relational space to question conventional distinctions between the domestic and the urban, or the private and the public. They use live, immediate and durational events to perform alternative ways of living alongside one another, and create alternative sites of debate. Three residential performances are presented here. The alternative domestic relations that are performed have all been temporary, or ‘micro-utopian’, but they all contribute and respond to long-standing personal, familial or collective projects.

Ikea Disobedients

Ikea Disobedients is an architectural performance by Andrés Jaque Arquitectos. It builds on research based in New York City which identified a number of households who transformed their home into social and political spaces, by inhabiting unusual spaces, constructing alternative economies or living in atypical families. For Andrés Jaque Arquitectos, these households demonstrate how disobedient domestic behaviour can accommodate unique political activity:

Disobeying IKEA’s injunction to certain social interactions within sunny apolitical home enclaves is what we propose as an urban counter-notion to the domestic. Not a neutral space but one installing controversy and disagreement precisely at the site where affections may also emerge.
During gallery-bound performances, these disobedient households act out some of their everyday activities within an elaborate stage made from improperly assembled and stacked Ikea furniture. Fixed separations between spectators and performers are avoided and the disobedient households invite the audience into their regular domestic experiences, opening them up to frictions and discussions. The disobedient’s ‘unconventional domestic approaches challenged the apolitical ideal of “the independent republic of your home”, as well as demonstrating the richness of social interactions that straddle the public–private divide’.

EXYZT

EXYZT initiates temporary architecture projects by socialising, working and sleeping in empty and unusual sites. Formed in 2003 by five architects including Nicolas Henninger, it now operates as a collective of regular collaborators including graphic designers, cooks, DJs and pyrotechnicians. EXYZT’s projects bring together collectives and friends to construct ambitious living spaces (often including swimming pools, saunas and nightclubs) for themselves, before opening the temporary spaces up to a broader public – who share what they have made and suggest further contributions. Henninger describes this process as an extension of hosting guests:

> Where is the place you can host people the best – it is your place. When you want to invite your friends for dinner and you want to please them you host them. It is an extension of that feeling; where it meets with the public. … We are making a private space where we host the public. Where is the border?

EXYZT played with this domestic border during the 2006 Venice Biennale, where they worked with Patrick Bouchain to inhabit the French pavilion. To satisfy Biennale rules they placed a clear yellow line between the public and private areas but transgressed this by hosting parties, meals and inviting people to use their sauna and plunge pool. Henninger describes how the private–public divide was carefully staged. ‘[Patrick Bouchain] was 60 years old and he tricked them all! We said this is the line; this is private, this is public. [The commissioner] could see the yellow line. … But who can really tell you that you can’t invite someone from the public into your private space?’
The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home

The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home is a family of six: Gary Anderson, Lena Simic and their four children. They have all agreed to use their family unit to find ways of acting against capitalist culture. ‘We have decided to ask questions around art and culture, money and capitalism, private and public, familiar and civic life. We have decided to disobey. We as a family have decided to be naughty.’

With the goal of ‘a workable model for cultural dissent based in a family’ they have made their spare bedroom into a meeting place for artists, activists and cultural dissenters, turning conversations and actions that would normally be carried out in private into public behaviours, analysed and interrogated as performance art events. ‘Through the simple act of placing the family within the frame by designating the spare bedroom the institute and documenting family activities as assiduously and seriously as any art event, the day to day activities of the family are reframed as ritualised public performances that are denaturalised and laid open to scrutiny.’

The Hazardous Family is a picnic performance by the Institute, which took place in Parsonage Park in Manchester as part of the HAZARD Festival in 2008. During the performance, Gary and Lena took it in turns to recite excerpts from Marx and Engels' writing on the family, while the children ran around in the background, eating picnic food. The event fulfilled a familiar practical requirement (finding a space to feed the family when away from home), whilst concurrently critiquing the Institute’s heteronormative actions in front of an audience.

Interpreting residential performances

Commenting on the quality of residential performances

The residential performances described here demonstrate in different ways that alternative, collective forms of living can crop up in everyday spaces. They have all opened prototypical domestic realities to new audiences and participants to trigger action and debate. A question which remains is how initial claims for the creation of ‘counter publics’, however small or fleeting, might be critiqued or commented on. How does the public behaviour of the Ikea Disobedients change the day-to-day experiences of MoMA’s visitors when they leave the
Do EXYZT’s transgressing guests behave differently when they leave the inhabited pavilion, on the right side of the yellow line? Do audiences or passers-by viewing the Institute’s family performances return to normal family life?

To develop responses to these questions, the social and material relationships that are performed through these experimental residential projects need be followed, allowing personal processes of participation, invitation and transformation to be articulated. Albena Yaneva has explored how ethnography can be used to find meaning in the processes and controversies of architecture. For her, this methodological approach has been adopted to directly confront the dominance of critical theory, and its obligation to find meaning in architecture by applying symbolic social meaning to abstracted technical matter. In order to undertake ‘an ethnography of design’, Yaneva situated herself within the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), an architecture practice set up by Rem Koolhaas. Between 2002 and 2004 she ‘lived’ in the Rotterdam office, following the architects as they made and communicated tentative decisions and assembled around foam ‘design objects’. She found meaning in the everyday, tentative practice and performance of architecture and recognised that architecture was a collective and co-operative activity performed by many actors including architects and non-architects, humans and non-humans. Yaneva embedded herself within OMA and commented on the routinised actions and objects of architecture from the position of participant observer. She maintained a clear divide between herself, producing research, and the OMA, producing architecture.

Self-narratives

Many of the live events that have been discussed are accompanied by self-made films, scripts and photographs that follow the life of the project. The *Ikea Disobedients* performance is accompanied by a short film, made with stop-motion footage and a voiceover. It introduces the domestic lives of a number of disobedient subjects and critiques the Ikea catalogue for its dominance of white and blonde protagonists and fixed notions of family. This remains a publically accessible, archived work on the MoMA website. EXYZT also use films, made by members of the collective, and shared via YouTube. During the inhabitation of the French Pavilion five short films – the *Metavilla Sessions* – were made that reveal some of the more hidden activities, including the construction process, the bed spaces and the sauna parties. Stop-motion, time-lapse and amateur footage is set to music, and participants directly perform to the camera.
For The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home, self-produced documentation is used as a mechanism for framing everyday family rituals as artworks, elevating them to the status of a scripted performance event. This confuses conventional boundaries between domestic activities and shared activities that are opened to public scrutiny. Scripts, instructions and transactions of the Institute’s performances are recorded and have been subsequently published. Unedited DIY/audience footage of performances is also made available through YouTube.

The close relationship between the live durational performances and multi-format documentation could provide a rich space for architectural ethnographic research, if a reflexive ethnographic position is adopted. Since the live residential performances and accompanying ‘field notes’ are produced by the same authors (both individual and collective), autoethnography is explored as a method for researching residential performances. Autoethnography allows the researching and making of residential performances to be undertaken together, recognising a role within architectural research and practice for a knowing subject.

Autoethnography as a research method for residential performances

Reflexive ethnographic positions, such as autoethnography, allow researchers to understand and write about residential performances as an active co-producer and collaborator, rather than an embedded participant observer.

[Reflexive accounts] have the effect of transforming the ‘cultural’ text into a speaking subject, … who sees as well as is seen, who evades, argues, probes back. … It obliges writers to find diverse ways of rendering negotiated realities as multisubjective, power-laden, and incongruent. In this view ‘culture’ is always relational.

Autoethnography has been developed primarily within communication and education studies, and describes writing that ‘tells about a culture at the same time as it tells about a life’. Autoethnographies can include ethnographers studying their own culture, the use of personal narratives by ethnic minority groups and the creative use of personal experiences within ethnographic writing.
Carolyn Ellis suggests that it can be used as ‘an avenue for helping us understand narratively and conceptually a larger relational, communal and political world of which we are part and that speaks to critical engagement, social action and change’. Since the relationship between the production of a community and the self is a dialectical one, through describing a personal transformation as an active participant autoethnographers are not only describing an individual experience but also the wider relational community that they have actively co-produced. ‘If culture circulates through all of us, then how can autoethnography not connect to a world beyond the self?’

Storytelling becomes an important communication tool in autoethnographic research. By describing a personal process of negotiation, vulnerability and transformation, autoethnographic stories provide the ability to offer one of many voices that have been transformed through residential performances, whilst also commenting on wider cultural experiences. Deborah Reed-Danahay argues that autoethnographic writers can ‘assert alternative forms of meaning and power from those associated with the dominant, metropolitan culture’. Autoethnographic storytelling could therefore provide a critical framework for researching collective housing projects attempting to seek alternatives to dominant forces of atomisation and privatisation.

**OPERA: a work-in-progress architectural autoethnography**

Within Studio Polpo I have started to develop an autoethnographic study of one of our ongoing shared living projects: *Open Public Experimental Residential Activity (OPERA)*. OPERA is a series of sleepover performances that we have initiated within vacant city-centre locations. Initially conceived as a way to test shared living in an immediate, live and prototypical way, the OPERA programme has developed into a longer-term programme of events, writing and prototyping.

The autoethnographic research method developed for OPERA draws on a study by Emma Gieben-Gamal and Juliette MacDonald, two female academics who have researched their personal use of laptops. They use autoethnography as a stimulus for examining how their laptops, as mobile offices, transform public and domestic spaces. Using diary entries, written over a three-month period, they describe how domestic spaces can become ‘more than “home”’ through specific,
gendered, negotiations and transformations. They combine first-person storytelling with academic writing to connect lived experiences with theoretical analysis, and use this approach to open a wider discussion about the boundaries of private space and the desirability of embedded technologies for interior architectural design.

About OPERA: open public experimental residential activity

In 2014 Studio Polpo responded to an open call for artists to exhibit work in an empty former department store in Sheffield city centre. Our accepted proposal, framed as a durational performance, led to the

Figure 11.1 Building OPERA 1 partitions using plywood reclaimed from CNC manufacturing process.
installation of eating, sleeping, cooking and eating facilities into part of the vacant building (Figures 11.1–11.5). OPERA 1 was open for 10 days (the duration of a curated group exhibition) and each evening Studio Polpo invited guests to share a meal, host domestic activities and stay the night. Up to six residents shared the house overnight, including Studio Polpo directors, our friends and members of the public. The evening meal usually prompted discussions about shared forms of living, empty spaces, and city-centre living. Some evenings residents arrived with specific activities to share, including a screening of short films about alternative living arrangements, screen printing, haiku poetry writing, impromptu music making, and a workshop about accessible toilet design in relation to LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) issues. In addition to the residents who contributed in the evening and overnight, a large number people visited the exhibition during the day. This created two types of interaction with the project: a quick, usually unexpected, visit and a longer arranged evening and overnight event.
After the intensity of the 10-day round-the-clock performance, Studio Polpo developed OPERA into a continued and more sustainable performance programme. We adopted an alternative format, a one-day-a-month sleepover event, so that the overnight performances were compatible with other work and family commitments and, generally, life outside the performance. The infrastructure of OPERA 2 (the kitchen, bedrooms, dining area, sink, room dividers etc.) was physically nestled within a larger creative arts space, occupying a substantial empty retail unit through a meanwhile use agreement with the landlord. This time OPERA also began to develop a life outside of

Figure 11.3 Screen printing evening event during OPERA 1.
the performance: although the event was curated and performed by Studio Polpo once a month, other groups borrowed the infrastructure to host activities, including intimate theatre performances and spoken-word events.

Starting out as an experimental shared living space, OPERA has developed into a broader programme of performances, writing and research (Figure 11.6). We anticipate that future OPERA activity will
continue to activate vacant buildings, testing different locations and performance formats. In addition, members of Studio Polpo are also exploring an OPERA model which would incorporate elements of the performance into a longer-term and financially independent hosting facility.

Figure 11.5  Doing the washing up at OPERA 1, with a view to the street.
An autoethnographic study of OPERA

During OPERA 1, Studio Polpo decided not to record much of the performance. This was motivated by a desire not to alter the dynamics of the participant interactions as well as practical limitations on our time due to demands of delivering the performance itself. The documentation was limited to occasional photographs and blog writing. A journal was left in each bedroom and guests were encouraged to write about the evening before going to sleep. Many of the guests wrote brief reflections on their experience of taking part in OPERA, revealing their apprehensions, concerns and pleasures. In many cases participants found ways to relate and compare experiences to their everyday life and to wider society. On completing OPERA 1 Studio Polpo published a scrapbook of notes, sketches, ephemera and diagrams which had been collected, left or found throughout the performance.

Between completing OPERA 1 and starting OPERA 2 I reviewed the diary entries and scrapbook; recollected from memory several regular rituals, conversations and thoughts; and made note of specific one-off events and interactions. These captured aspects of the project that were valuable to me and provided field notes from verbatim diary entries, memories and scratch notes, leading to the writing of an autoethnographic short story.

My field notes, collected and related to the whole of the 10-day OPERA 1 performance, were condensed into a story that was narratively
structured around one 24-hour performance cycle. The use of creative writing, and the augmentation of time, was used to create an engaging account without diverging from the conventions of creative non-fiction. An extract from this autoethnographic short story, presented at the Housing: A Critical Perspective Conference, Liverpool, 8–9 April 2015, is reproduced below:

I have finished serving up the vegetable dahl, slow cooking since lunchtime, and we quickly begin exchanging our day to day experiences at home and the potential benefits and annoyances of living collectively. ‘I absolutely can’t stand it when the neighbours burn plastic in their garden.’ Jo energetically announces.

Familiar architectural conversations – about meanwhile use, co-housing, relational space making – seem to find resonance with Rats’ experiences. ‘Communardism has never had a better time for growth with the depletion of affordable housing stock.’ But his anecdotes and ideas quickly change the dynamic of the conversation, preventing academic discussions from dominating and forcing them to become, I don’t know, more creative? I am pleased that the project resonates with his experiences; it offers some reassurance that the project can accommodate multiple overlapping needs, interests, and desires. Rats wouldn’t come if this was a twee pop up! I think to myself...

I start to clear the plates from the table. ‘Leave it to us’ jokes Adam ‘If you take too much responsibility this will become your house!’ I smiled, retreating from the makeshift sink and towards one of the bed spaces. It’s a nice quote, I think, stopping my train of thought to consider the relationship between hosting and losing control. There seems to be a continual friction between the two. I want people to have a good time, I want people to enjoy the meal, I want discussions to be stimulating and diverse. But I realise that the structure of the OPERA residencies should not afford me the ability to control this. It is great that conversation and drink are flowing tonight, but the possibility for this not to be the case should always remain open.

Tonight, Ian has arrived with some short films for us to watch and two of the bed spaces have been adapted to make a mini cinema. It feels cosy; people are sat on beds and stools, filling the full length of the private area. After four or five films we all agree to go to bed, and head upstairs, as a group, through the expansive empty exhibition to the toilets where we can brush our teeth.
Writing has provided a method of inquiry as well as way to communicate the project both individually and collectively with a view to shape future OPERA events and shared living projects. Reflective, personal and collective writing styles have been used to find meaning in the convivial, sociable and mundane exchanges facilitated through the sleepover performances. Writing was also used to communicate the material performance set, without isolating it from the production of a social and relational project.

With other members of Studio Polpo, different styles of writing have been used (autobiographical, diary notes, academic) to develop accounts of OPERA which connect theoretical motivations and contexts with personal experiences and actions. Storytelling and the creation of alternative housing narratives have become an intertwined part of OPERA, viewed as part of a wider prototyping practice within the studio.

Reflections on residential performance

Practising residential performances

The residential performances, including OPERA, stealthily nestled themselves within prominent spaces in the city, challenging boundaries and borders, sometimes by playfully altering physical thresholds, sometimes by diligently complying with organisational rules as part of the performance. Hosting, curated invitations and unpredictable encounters became a way to bring audiences across conventional institutional borders and into prototypical domestic spaces.

Performance practices can be adopted by architects to peek into a world beyond the protection of Cartesian representation, and open the making of domestic spaces to collective concerns. Framing OPERA as a performance allowed Studio Polpo to use familiar architectural tools and skills (designing room layouts, working with fabricators, communicating with stakeholders) but deploy them to unfamiliar and open ends. We were not interested in fixing and prescribing spaces or uses, instead motivated to create an open framework for testing, playing and experimenting with others. In order to adopt this position, we framed the project as an art commission, testing the accepted boundaries of our discipline.

OPERA has provided a relatively low threshold for participation in collective living; the performances have fitted within existing living and
working patterns, taking individuals out of these for one night to act and imagine otherwise. However, it connects into a wider practice of shared living within Studio Polpo, which includes art commissions, newspaper publications, feasibility studies and co-housing design. OPERA has, in some instances, functioned as a taster for further commitment that our longer-term projects have supported.

Researching residential performances

As the city becomes increasingly controlled by supply and demand, and conventional sites of counter-public representation (such as the coffee-house or city square) allow no ability to act outside of marketised consensus, perhaps the home is a good place to begin constructing social, lived space? Although revisionist understandings of public space-making reveal hidden political roles for the home, domestic settings are usually used to address specific inequalities and gender struggles. The intention of this research has been to demonstrate how shared domestic experiences can also be used to confront wider social, economic and cultural questions.

This research also contributes to a wider discussion about the cultural value of artistic practices and an established need for deeper understandings of ‘the processes (rather than outcomes) of arts engagement’, especially within policy making. Autoethnographic storytelling has opened the possibility of researching and articulating the processes of OPERA rigorously and reflexively, as both a project co-producer and researcher. The use of theory, peer practices and personal storytelling has allowed Studio Polpo to construct invitations, boundaries and physical interventions within our work with raised awareness; it is hoped that collaborative ethnographic approaches could be used in the future to inform longer-term shared living projects and housing narratives as well as to capture participant experiences and engagements with emerging contemporary art practices directed towards domestic space.