

Investigating  
heteronormativity's  
lasting historical impact  
on the queer experience,  
and its imprint upon  
architecture.



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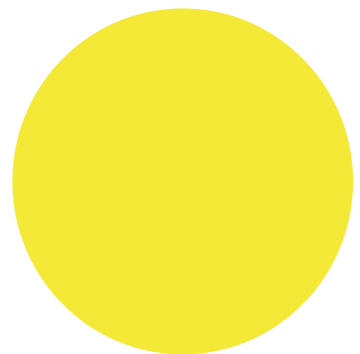
## introduction

This critical study will look to ask the question, what is heteronormativity and how does it affect the experiences of queer individuals? Through these ideas presented within Katarina Bonnevier's *Behind Straight curtains: Towards a Queer Feminist theory of architecture* where her key aim is to explore 'queerness and the theatricality of architecture' (Bonnevier, 2007, p. 15) while critiquing heteronormative structures. While Bonnevier challenges Modernisms underlying contributions to homophobia with its relevance regarding its feminine and masculine tropes. This furthering the conversation of heteronormative designs underlying bias, both historically and present-day along with its impacts society, as well as the tension between celebrated stereotypes and lived realities and how this analytical interpretation and understating of heteronormativity be applied with architectural forms in mind?

With an added outlook through Brent Pilkey's thesis *Queering Heteronormativity at Home in London* he looks to apply this further conversation of feminist and queer theory. Arguing its wider scope through urban city planning and its societal impact, where "queers have to work to overturn the heterosexualised nature of the city, and only then will they create a legitimate place to call their own." (Pilkey, 2013, p. 87)

With this deepened understanding Andrew Logan Caldwell's analytical design process explores how the 'queer approach instead leads towards the concept of blurring binaries.' (Caldwell, 2017, p Vii) Being that challenges heteronormativity's current bias within architecture, and how this reapplication of the queer identity tests the way we physically understanding and interpret space.

Investigating a wider scope of urban planning with a 'queer' understanding, within a city space where 'queers have to work to overturn the heterosexualised nature of the city, and only then will they create a legitimate place to call their own' (Pilkey, 2013, p. 87) Furthering the question is this interpretation moving towards a 'tasteful' normative, further ostracising individuality of those falling beyond the scope of heteronormative respectability and approval through 'fitting' presentations of sexuality.



Brent S. Pilkey explores non-surprisingly focussed research distilled to just pockets of 'queerness' within our urban city planning limited simply to its gay village. While some argue the celebration of queer history and queer identity, it is suggested the sanitisation and watering down of queer space due to urban regeneration and gentrification.

Used to attract tourists searching a cosmopolitan experience, commercial gay clusters are increasingly linked as ethnic diverse groupings within city planning and policies while tourism has been commodified as a result. Arguing that the gay village has been marketed and packaged as a fixed city space to be 'experienced' by non queer individuals. An example of this environmental scenario by Mark Casey, a geographer, brings to light how heterosexuals are consuming the Pink Triangle, Newcastle-upon-Tyne's local gay community. Leading to a suggestion that "the popularity of the space amongst heterosexuals, as well as homophobia by gay men using gay commercial establishments has resulted in lesbian women finding themselves excluded from these spaces" (Pilkey, 2013, p. 89)

The complexity of the LGBTQ identity in these urban spaces is reviewed by scholars to be where the 'true' queer identity and the gay village do not easily due to its passive superficial nature Pilkey highlights. Following this point where a commercial space cannot be called an authentically queer space "once it becomes incorporated and recuperated within capitalist markets, once it becomes a product to be consumed, it ceases to be very queer" (Pilkey, 2013, p. 89)

To develop a greater understanding of how heteronormativity effects the queer experience both on a domestically and through society it must first be defined. Explored by Human geographer Gavin Brown as "*the processes that socially construct a privileged heterosexuality (and related binary understandings of gender) over homosexuality and unconventional presentations of gender.*" (Pilkey, 2013, p. 14) Therefore, this assumption plays on a societal construct expressing heterosexuality as the normative by definition, in which the way a wider community is formed. Society and space are assumed to be constructed by the concept surrounding heteronormativity as touched upon by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Underlined through the "gay identity is predicated on continuous acts of declaration, whereas heterosexual identity is naturally presumed." (Pilkey, 2013, p. 15) With Pilkey's point being that by inhabiting a space, people have the direct effect of oppressing minorities, through an assumed heteronormativity with this change being through human action.

Through Pilkeys work he explores the concept of the 'Gay domestic Aesthetic' and how the history of materiality has formed around a domestic style, questionably fuelled by gay male stereotype. The core notions being that "challenging the idea of the home as simply a site of privatized family life, queering notions of domesticity" (Pilkey, 2013, p. 105) but equally the ideas behind a homely aesthetics can domesticate, regulate, and sanitize public perceptions of gay men, confining what constitutes as acceptable gay masculinity.

Pilkeys work, further outlines material examples of this aesthetic, arguing the point that this skewed visual representation builds off the ideas of a successful upper middle class wealthy home. Such representation is highlighted of Raymond and Laird's home within the Toronto Life magazine within Pilkeys research. The understanding of this domestic and architectural outlook follows the relationship of materiality and queer history. "Glass is a building material that connects both high-modernist architecture at home and beyond to gay occupied spaces" (Pilkey, 2013, p. 107) Pilkey within this point argues that not only are its physical properties taking president but its conceptual importance blending a traditionally divided between public and private space.

These conceptual ideals are mirrored within architectural works of Philip Johnson's Glass House completed in 1949. Embodied through its form being almost completely of glass, conceptualising the gay individual hiding in plain sight, but equally magnified by it where 'claustrophobically enclosed space in which gay people are forced to relegate their hearts and souls.' (Stern, 2022)

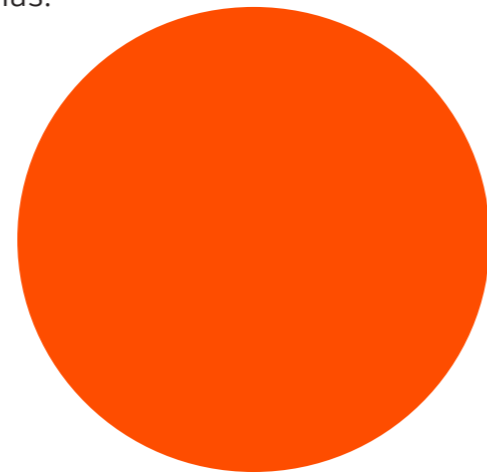
A point specifically looked upon by Steven Simon Ofield who believes that contemporary queer theory can find its exemplar architectural symbol in the glass. (Pilkey, 2013, p. 108) Ofield draws from London's Gay scene, mentioning its historical impact, where 'Large glass windows on the front, and glass throughout the interior, it was found, would move the gay bar out of the repressive and reclusive 1980s into the more modern and accepting 1990s". (Pilkey, 2013, p. 108) This reflecting previously mentioned Philip Johnson's architectural aesthetic echoing this ideology behind glass.

Although these ideologies behind materiality reflect the liberation of the gay identity through greater visibility. Many of these ideas are rooted from unhealthy and questionable stereotypes of gay men rather than a celebration of the wider community. Where Ofield touches upon the questionable notion that the Glass Brick is defined as a finite representation of queerness. Used to distort form and views around areas of London's Soho district and East London cruising spots between toilets and communal spaces. With Pilkeys contending this notion of one's sexual orientation being static and a predeterminable characteristic being that of a finite quality.

The tension between celebrated stereotypes and lived realities.

Underlining the bias within heteronormative design and how built space shapes the individual, with a historical cultural assumption of neutrality within spatial arrangement, where the unconscious societal construction re-enforces biases. Katarina Bonnevier makes clear the prevailing architectural idea around the term construction, often regarded as a strangely arcane expression rather than a social and cultural construct. As a result, rational arguments in favour of function and economy detract from superficiality and ornamentation characteristics. (Bonnevier, 2007, p. 18) This key point channelling the historical separation between the ornamental being considered as superfluous while external structure is deemed as necessity. Though a contrast in timeline may portray femininity or masculinity differently, for numerous modernists, 'form' evoked the idea of muscular masculinity according to architect Adrian Forty, in distinction to the defined, non-articulated 'formlessness.' Eve Kosofsky a literary theorist, within her work *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) highlighted this underlying model of masculinity directly contributing to homophobia.

This societal reflection also echoed within personal aesthetic, where Architect Adolf Loos, would himself dress in unassuming dark colour while designing for his wife lavish white mink dresswear, which reflected a bedroom designed exclusively in draped fur. 'He was operating with the interior as the feminine and the exterior as the masculine.' (Bonnevier, 2007, p. 18-19) These philosophies disconnecting the 'modern man' from any form of femininity, sexuality or class channelling a 'raid against ornament is not only gender-loaded but openly homophobic' (Bonnevier, 2007, p. 19) This being reflecting in the *Bloomsbury Rooms: Modernism, Subculture and Domesticity* with the notion explored that modernism holds firm an unhealthy heterosexual masculinity bias.



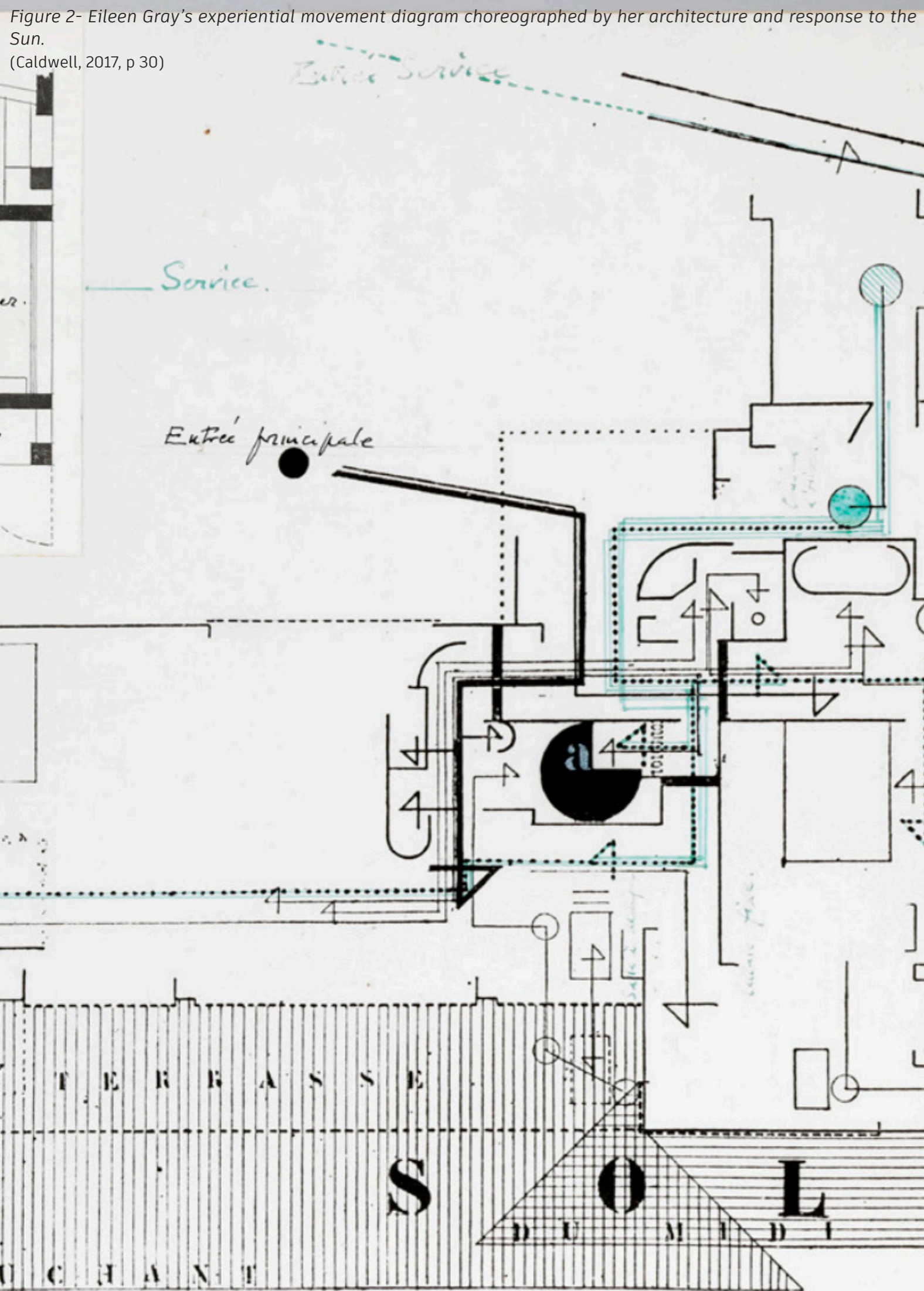
Heteronormative designs underlying bias both historically and present day along with how this impacts society.



Figure 1 - The living-room of E.1027, 1929 (ARAM | Eileen Gray, 2022)

Figure 2- Eileen Gray's experiential movement diagram choreographed by her architecture and response to the Sun.

(Caldwell, 2017, p 30)



In contrast to the unprecedented heteronormativity reflected within Modernism, Christopher Reed contrasts this notion of creative originality not at all singularly formulated as an objective property of male aggression. (Bonnievier, 2007, p. 19) Christopher Reed deconstructs these hierarchical binaries reflected within this 'hetero-only' narrative of modernism being solely that of conventional standards of masculinity. Instead celebrating "how the "Amusing Style" associated with the Bloomsbury group offered a kind of queer modernism." (Bonnievier, 2007, p. 19-20)

20 Rue Jacob and Mårbacka were such spaces embodying this alternative architectural ethos, produced under a non-heteronormative family nucleus, not reflecting as heteronormative as it had deemed it appear. (Bonnievier, 2007, p. 22) Eileen Gray (1878-1976), Natalie Barney (1876-1972) and Selma Lagerlöf (1858-1940) were all heroes of this alternative outlining president, Bonnievier explains. "The case shows the significance of the social scene and also the influence of a wider historical, literary and cultural context." (Bonnievier, 2007, p. 399) With these architectural ideals not being solely that of the buildings physical form but of its conversation. Moreover where "architecture prescribes behaviour; bodies and social situations are engaged with building elements" (Bonnievier, 2007, p. 48) With these buildings being that of social and theatrical accommodations for queer living. (Bonnievier, 2007, p. 399)

Through these read and lived performative experiences, E1027's architectural form is explored, built by Eileen Gray between 1926 and 1929. This "helps us understand Gray's approach to subverting gendered space in the home" (Caldwell, 2017, p 27) Gray's concept of the living-room combines these gendered spaces as a way to undermine the binary between feminine boudoirs and masculine studies. (Caldwell, 2017, p 27) A multifunctional space evoking all aspects of life from business meetings to pleasure and party's. Gray makes it inherently clear that it is only a conditioned space inherently imposed by heteronormative society and 'performance' that allow gendered space to exist. Challenging the experiences of this spaces by overlapping typically gendered areas with natural activity aspiringly contests the way in which we perceive special norms. Explored through "the [way] building as an act is ambiguous, open to interpretation, [while] not confined with normative constraints" (Caldwell, 2017, p 29) by engaging the body with the building form applies performance in its architecture. "where a person and the house set each other in motion." (Caldwell, 2017, p 29) Further Critiquing heteronormative modernist architecture which had previously been normalized within the field.

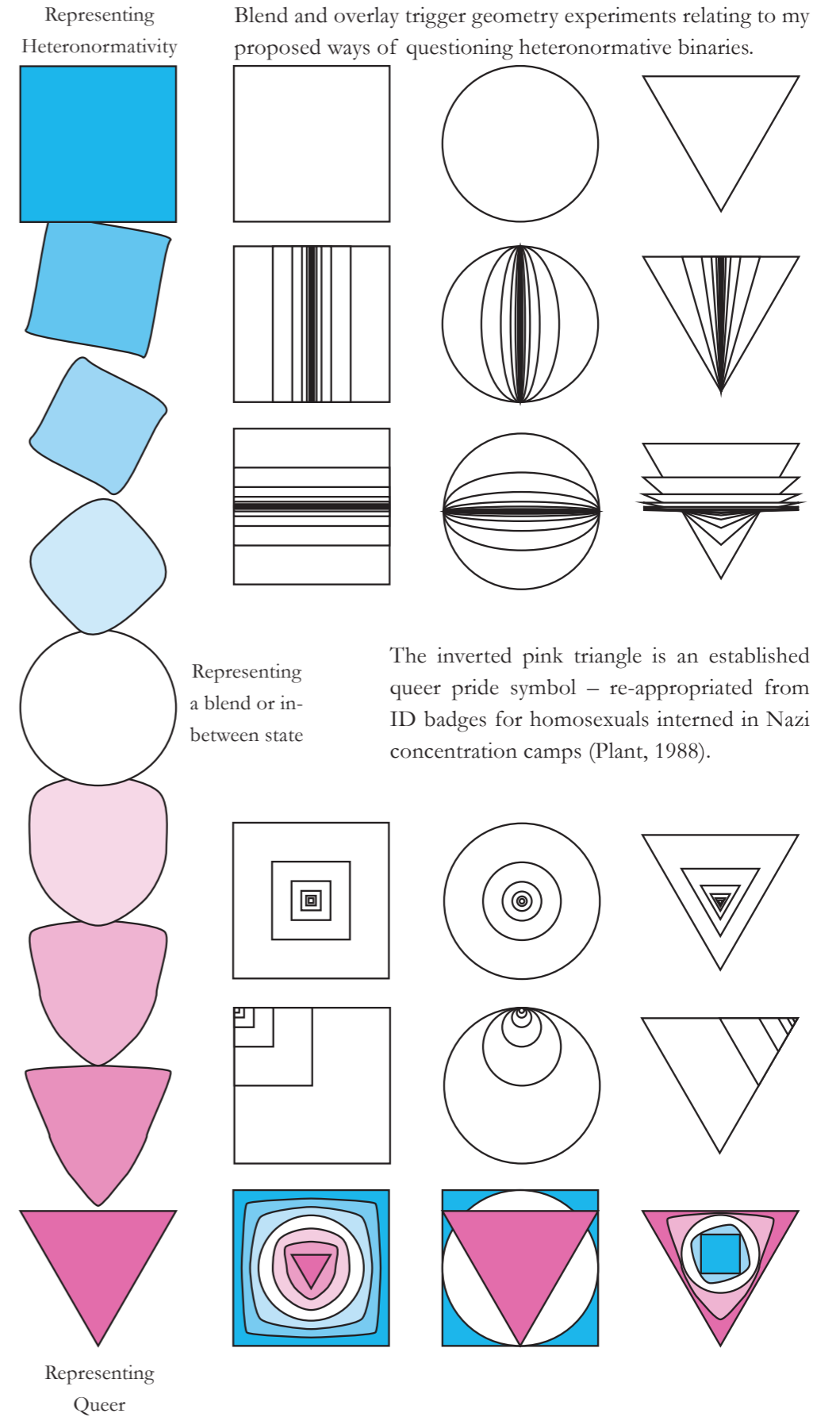
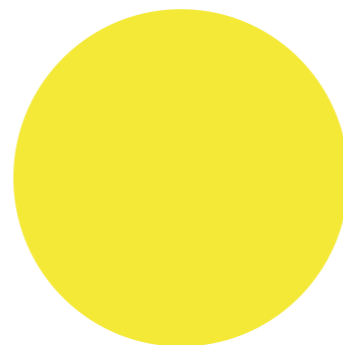
How an analytical interpretation and understating of heteronormativity be applied with architectural forms in mind.

Through an analytical understanding of heteronormativity its architectural applications can be further understood and dismantled. Andrew Logan Caldwell’s investigative design process disassembles application of queer space, understanding that “queer meaning can be seen to have become superficial through applied programme” where “There is no queer space; there are only spaces used by queers or put to queer use” (Caldwell, 2017, p 249) This being an analysed point within Caldwell thesis where an engagement of queer individuals through the process acknowledges the queer approach.

“The process of designing has instilled a queerness in the resulting architecture by disrupting binaries through [this] queer approach.” (Caldwell, 2017, p 249) This understanding of a blurred threshold or referred to as “fuzzy boundaries” within Caldwell’s design analysis, challenges the category of an in-between of queer spaces. Expanding the point that a simplification of queer architecture moves away from its broad expression of identity, where a “queer identity is such a broad spectrum to grapple with and design for.” (Caldwell, 2017, p 249) This taking on the understanding that there isn’t a simple singularity to queerness. Instead holding the idea of a queer design approach leading towards the concept of blurring binaries. (Caldwell, 2017, p 249)

Furthermore, with this understanding of the queer identity Caldwell identifies society’s questionable division of sexuality and gender “experimenting with how this can be subverted through the design of architecture.” (Caldwell, 2017, p 255) Analysing the way that a designed space is physically understood. Through the expression of form Caldwell “challenged the binary between people and architecture by engaging people with surface to express identity.” (Caldwell, 2017, p 255) While understanding that the domestic distortion of “gendered space in the home by designing space for all aspects of life” (Caldwell, 2017, p 255) allows for the dismantling of heteronormative understandings.

Through the analytical considerations of read and lived space, it is “obvious visual queer elements were read first in critical reviews as a superficial layer” (Caldwell, 2017, p 255) simplifying the queer identity to a visual aesthetic. Although Caldwell counteracts the point highlighting the importance of legibility within the design process where queer pride is celebrated. But in summery is concluded that “To design material architecture with a queer approach, it needed to be thought of through the lived experience of it” (Caldwell, 2017, p 255) with this analytical understanding of heteronormativity within architectural space reflected as more of a strategy than a material space.



Representing a blend or in-between state

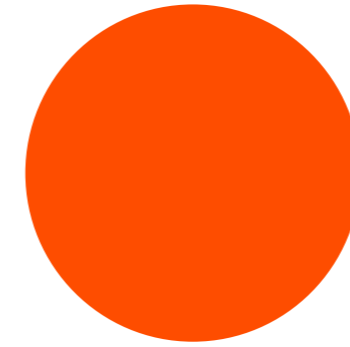
The inverted pink triangle is an established queer pride symbol – re-appropriated from ID badges for homosexuals interned in Nazi concentration camps (Plant, 1988).

Figure 2 - A diagrammatic exploration challanging hetronormativity within Caldwell's design proress. (Caldwell, 2017, p 16)

Through this Critical study heteronormativity's definition was explored highlighting its negative effects on architecture, the queer community and society. This understanding was articulated through three main bodies of work Katarina Bonneviere's Behind Straight curtains: Towards a Queer Feminist theory of architecture, Brent Pilkey's thesis Queering Heteronormativity at Home in London and Andrew Logan Caldwell's Blurring Binaries A Queer Approach to Architecture. These three works formulated the four key questions of, What is heteronormativity and how does it affect the experiences of Queer Individuals? Heteronormative designs underlining bias both historically and present-day along with how this impact society, the tensions between celebrated stereotypes and lives realities. Leading finally to the overarching interrogative of How can this analytical interpretation and understating of heteronormativity be applied with architectural forms in mind.

## Conclusion

Pilkey's Thesis brought to light how pockets of queerness, seen through the 'gay village' lead to the watering down and sanitation of the queer identity. This being due to urban regeneration and gentrification fuelled by the attraction of tourism in search of a cosmopolitan experience within commercial gay clusters. With this fixed city space to be 'experienced' by non queer individuals has resulted specifically in lesbian women being excluded from these spaces specifically. (Pilkey, 2013, p. 89)



## Continued Conclusion

An outline of materiality within Pilkey's thesis initially explored its stereotypes, building off the ideas of its limiting representation which only reflecting that of the successful upper middle class. This leading into an understanding of materiality's importance historically, where materiality's physical properties took president while a deeper-rooted conceptual identity was also understood.

More Specifically how the move of gay bars out of a repressive hidden experience led to the wider inclusion of glass, breaking down traditionally divided public and private spaces. (Pilkey, 2013, p. 108) Although unhealthy and questionable gay male stereotypes were questioned by Pilkey, where some academics distilled the use of glass to gay cruising spots and toilets. With the finally arguing notion that there not being a singular finite quality of queerness to be pre-understood as a predetermined characteristic.

An analysis of Katarina Bonnevier's breaking down of architectural definitions, highlighted an historic rooting of heteronormativity through a pigeonholing of femininity and masculinity. Emphasising the underlying model of masculinity and its direct contributions to homophobia within modernism specifically. This led to the investigation of Eileen Grays E1027's which helped create a greater understand of Gray's approach to subverting gendered space in the home. Where only a conditioned space inherently imposed by heteronormative society leads to gendered space existing and how an open interpretation not constrained by these norms allows for a engagement of the body with a buildings overall form.

These lead to the final questioning of how this analytical interpretation of heteronormativity could be understood within architectural forms themselves. Distilling the point that a simplification of queer architecture moves away from its broad expression of identity, while the importance of legibility within the design process helps celebrate queer pride. It is in-fact the lived experience in which allow for the queer approach within material architecture. That which challenges binary norms helps engage individuals through its physical materiality. Reflecting that the queer approach holds more a strategy than solely a physical form within architecture.



# MANIER -ESTO

Formulated through ideas taken from my research study, four key points were expressed. Distilling the idea of it not just a being buildings physical form that challenges heteronormativity but its objective materiality allowing for lived experience. With there not being a singular queer design theory but one that allows queer individuals to experience and inhabit spaces that challenge instilled binary norms.

We as Queer individuals, have a wider societal identity, while inhabiting physical spaces, fighting for change to have an overall impact.

With a societal acknowledgement of the queer identity, we are not solely defined by our pockets of queerness outlined by a 'gay village' looked upon with a cosmopolitan eye. As we are not experiences but in-fact a lived experience, together, allowing us to explore our broad expression of identity which inherently challenges binary norms. Where only a conditioned ideals inherently imposed by heteronormative society calls for a need to challenge these spaces. Challenging the 'tasteful' presentations of sexuality which further ostracises individuality to a heteronormative respectability and approval. We dismiss stereotypes that dilute queerness to its singular tropes, which simply don't exist and solely hinder its wider representation. Instead, we embarrass its broad spectrum of identity.

A call for a deeper understanding of it not being that of queer theory being the creation of a such space, but that of its inhabitation. Therefore, outwardly challenging binary norms allowing for an engagement of physical materiality.

Through a challenging of this ideology which pigeonhole the positions of femininity and masculinity. Reflected within our own architecture where the pretty ornamentation is superfluous to its functional construction. This contest subverting gendered space within architectural form whose underlying model of masculinity directly contributes to its homophobia. But through this wider understanding we push against the underlining predetermined heteronormativity within design in which built space is formed through unconscious societal re-enforced biases.

To allow for change we must overtly challenge the assumed binary within our society and its architecture. But confront the heteronormative historical architectural ethos in which we look upon the past and magnify previous theatrical expressions which became an outlining precedent for shaping our community. Building upon an alternative architectural ethos which is being embodied. Which does not reflect this previously assumed heteronormativity. With this definitive level of protest an embraced identity forms further engagement of government creating an environment which reflects our individual queer identity.

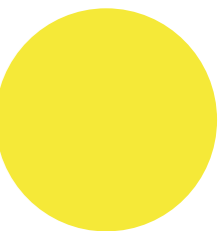
Through an ever-growing cultural awareness within society being that of a challenge of assumed binary, our inhabitation of space can reflect that of queer theory. Where our own individual expression fights against the notion of one singular characteristic, actively renouncing a simplification of queer architecture. Through only our inhabitation and acknowledgement with space do we make it a queer space.

identity

form

change

impact





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## **Images and Graphics**

Figure 1. Eileengray.co.uk. 2022. ARAM | Eileen Gray. [online] Available at: <<http://www.eileengray.co.uk/>> [Accessed 9 January 2022].

Figure 2. Caldwell, A.L., 2017. Blurring Binaries: A Queer Approach to Architecture.

Figure 3. Caldwell, A.L., 2017. Blurring Binaries: A Queer Approach to Architecture.