

Position

Strategies for Living in Houses

Colin Ripley

Everyone has the right to adequate housing, including protection from eviction, without discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity.

(Yogyakarta Principles, 2017)¹

See the girl on the TV dressed in a bikini

She doesn't think so but she's dressed for the H-Bomb (For the H-Bomb)

(Gang of Four, 1979)²

Despite the significant developments over the past decades in areas of queer rights, and even despite the introduction of legislation around non-discriminatory housing in many jurisdictions, housing remains a problem for queer people. We have evidence of this all around us, whether it takes the form of homelessness for queer youth, discriminatory landlords, or the cultural difficulties faced by queer seniors in retirement communities and long-term care facilities.

The problem of queer housing can never go away because it is a central component of queerness. The problem of queer housing remains persistent and recalcitrant because the *house* – the single-family house and by extension apartments, condominiums and the like – is a central structure of heterosexual hegemony, the primary architectural expression of hetero-normativity. All housing, at least in the developed world, is designed and constructed from within that hegemonic tradition, using models that assume hetero-normativity in its users: even if the client for a new house is, for example, a gay couple, all decisions made in the design are made from within a straight tradition, all construction is produced by a construction industry formed around non-queer hegemonic industrial and business practices, all materials sourced and processed from within an exploitative colonising regime of resource extraction. And what would be different anyway? Wouldn't our hypothetical gay couple want the same things as everyone else: a master bedroom with ensuite bath, a guest bedroom or maybe a room for the kid, a yard where they can sit out and a patio for barbecuing, a living room with a huge TV...

The nuclear family and the industrial suburban house share a common origin and a linked destiny. Both were born in the aftermath of the Second World War. The nuclear family would not have been imaginable as a concept prior to Hiroshima (and does not figure in American literature of the 1930s), and the industrialised suburb, such as Levittown (but this is equally true of the Case Study Houses in California) is inconceivable without the industrial war machine in America. And both of course depended on a whole set of new inter-linked infrastructures for their creation and nourishing: new mobilities offered by the mass-produced car; new infrastructures of highways and schools; new industries needing to be fed such as advertising and finance; new ubiquitous modes of communication and indoctrination – the telephone but most importantly television. *The creation of the nuclear family was at the core of the new industrial complex that drove America's postwar affluence.*

The relationship is even deeper than simple common origins, but is implicit, constitutive and constructive: as much as the industrial suburban house is a product for the nuclear family, the nuclear family is a product of the industrial suburban house. Take for example the Levittown Cape Cod House from 1947, which confronts us in the famous 1950 photograph by the American photographer Bernard Hoffman for Life magazine.³ [Fig. 1] There are two critical artefacts in this photo – three if we include the car, of which only a tiny fragment appears in the corner of the image: the Cape Cod House, in the background, and the nuclear family, in the foreground, described in the caption as Bernard Levey, truck supervisor, and his family. The perfect scene of house and nuclear family is not just presented once, but three times, with the Levey family in front of three houses: the houses they purchased in 1947, 1948 and 1950. So this is not simply a snapshot, not a memorialising of the arrival of the new Levittowners for the family scrapbook, but a staged and carefully repeated photograph, designed and produced to clarify and emphasise exactly the relationship between house and family. This photograph is a manifesto.

A closer look at the house reveals the very precise way in which it serves the needs of this concept of family – and no other: bedrooms that crystallise the family structure and roles, isolating and stabilising sexual functions; the bathroom that hides all bodily functions, producing shame and anxiety around the physical; the kitchen that reifies gender roles within the family while at the same time – in the new, mechanised kitchen of Levittown – eliminating anything dirty or natural. The cleansing and standardisation of programme is clear in form and materiality as well, with the simplest possible rectilinear form and industrially produced materials and equipment, focused on concepts of reproduction – or at least reproducibility – and repetition, while relentlessly, if ironically, privileging privacy and opacity. The house is designed to produce and maintain the idea of the nuclear family as a concept and as a social construction, not to serve the needs of the actors in that family drama, or the needs of their bodies. Caught between the industrial need for reproducibility and the structural need for separation, crystallisation of roles and denial of the biological, the body is squeezed, the erotic is removed, and psyches and identities forced into little boxes with locked doors.

Fig. 1: Truck supervisor Bernard Levey (rear left) standing with his family in front of their home in new housing development. Levittown, New York, 1950. Photo: Getty Images: The LIFE Picture Collection. Getty #50324702.



As destructive as this scenario has been for society at large, and ironically for the family itself, this is not our concern here. Instead, we are concerned with what is missing: there is no place in this monoculture for queer bodies of any kind. *For queer people, the suburb is an extermination camp.*

This is where Third World Gay Liberation, in their seminal *What We Want, What We Believe* from 1971, made a crucial strategic error. Along with the laudable and clear item '5. We want the abolition of the institution of the bourgeois nuclear family', they included a much weaker and destructive item '8. We want decent and free housing, fit shelter for human beings'.⁴ While free housing is laudable – and the topic for another article – decent housing, indeed any housing at all, is, again, the primary architectural expression of heteronormativity. The provision of decent housing can only bolster the bourgeois nuclear family. In short: *Queer housing is a contradiction in terms. Not even a queer architect can design a queer house.*

But where does this leave us, as queer people living in a straight hegemony? Where does it leave us as *humans with bodies*, craving shelter and safety and a place to live that is in accordance with our experience of self and of living in the world? What strategies can we mobilise, what strategies have we mobilised, for living in houses? We know there are different types of strategies, strategies of hiding, of denial, of shame, of activism. There are strategies of the quotidian – ways of surviving within a structure that is at best oppositional or constraining, and that at worst ignores and nullifies our very existence. In these strategies we remain victims, even when at our most violent, even when at our most present and most visible.

Strategies of occupation: We make use of houses, shelter in them, sleep and eat and fuck in them, but without allowing the houses to contaminate ourselves. We do not identify with them, they are not expressions of who we are. We are an occupying army, interested in using but not in stewarding. We know these houses do not belong to us, and we do not dwell in them. We are squatters, we paint graffiti on the walls and leave empty champagne bottles and used condoms on every surface.

We play house. We mow the lawn, we paint the trim and clean the gutters. We host dinner parties with the family next door and holiday celebrations for our own extended families. We pretend that we belong in this house. I understand: we need to belong, we yearn to have a place, but somehow, we know deep down it's just not possible. So we keep trying: we get married. We buy tasteful modern furniture and the best kitchen knives. We agonise over paint colours and lighting fixtures. Our house is a doll's house, and we are the dolls. *For children, playing house is never about the house. It's always about gender and sexual roles. It's about pretending to be something you can't.*

We use the house to hide our difference, to project an image of normalcy. This establishes a radical dichotomy that mirrors that of our own divided psyches. This strategy is about hiding and dissimulation – but not assimilation – and it produces an interior energy that is by its nature unstable. Architecturally, this is a strategy of radical interiority, a strategy of the closet. And like any closet, the interiors of our houses contain a collection of wonders as well as skeletons, fantastic and phantasmic images of our selves and of our shame.

We walk through the front door and into the bedroom. We strip off the trappings of normalcy, the suit and tie carefully set aside for tomorrow, replaced by the skin of leather. In the basement, we know, in the

dungeon, hidden from view of the normal world, another shameful body has been waiting, patiently, for its punishment.

We are thieves in our own houses, penetrating its flesh and infesting its being. Knowing our presence is unwanted, we enter by stealth. This is a variant strategy of occupation, but instead of occupying as an army, instead of setting up camp in the territory of the enemy, we enter the body of the house as a virus. We bring our degenerate customs, our lovers, our open marriages and abnormal *menages*. Bit by bit we change the tissue of the house, its ability to support (hetero) life. And then we spread the contagion out of the house, into the neighbourhood, the city, the country, with networks gleaned from Facebook and Grindr. Or we sit dormant, like Genet in the house of Jacky Maglia, waiting and watching.⁵

Strategies of Avoidance: We come to understand, somehow, that living in houses – despite the strategies of occupation – is deadly and poisonous to our souls. There's no place like home, literally. Some of us, more prescient than others – or perhaps more stubborn, or more unlucky – know that there are no workable strategies. We can't live in houses.

For some of us this means making our own habitations in abandoned factories or storefronts – until these too become housified, re-developed for the market, that is: for the straight market. For others it means living outside of hegemonic forms: in shelters, or rooming houses, in hotels (like Genet, again, with a packed suitcase always under the bed) or on the street.⁶ These are maybe the strongest of us, those who realise that any move to living in houses is to deny our queerness, to accept colonisation and subjugation. For us, there really is no place like home.

But of course, in the end we all know, deep down, that there is only one acceptable strategy. We need to demand an end to houses and to all existing housing. We need to *burn it all down* and start again. We need to produce means of shelter that are not simply expressions of the hetero norm, structures that allow all of us to be who we are in whatever social and material systems we choose. We live in tents and huts of our own making. We sleep wherever and with whoever we want. We build a new world in our own image.

Strategies of Intervention: Beyond simple occupation of the house, alternate to leaving it entirely, there are strategies in which we address directly the material fact of the house. These have been tentative, knowing that the structures of the world that define the house are too strong for any real attack. We bring the closet to the street: we paint the eaves in rainbow colours. We restore the gingerbread, make a garden with a water feature. We call this the Halloween Parade: it is a strategy of costuming – it is the house in drag. In some ways, this is the most aggressive strategy of all, a strategy of de-norming and appropriation, a strategy of queer colonisation. We re-make the house in our own image. This is also the strategy of queer gentrification.

From another view, this is a strategy of amazing restraint – of weakness and victimhood. We make changes that cannot cause alarm, that are easily restored, and worse, that increase our property values – strengthening along the way the hold of the hegemony. It is a strategy of fear – we are determined to be good citizens. It is also a camp strategy of (self)-denial and (self)-mockery, the obverse of strategies of closeting. It is in the end a localised and personal expression of self and of desire, but it denies the political reality in

which we live, the absolute hegemony of the norm. Can we go further? Can we find a way to transform, to trans the form of houses, to make our houses like our bodies sites for resistance? Can we approach the issue as architects, determined – despite the impossibility stated above – to operate projectively, through design, to develop strategies that extend beyond the everyday, beyond idle practice, beyond avoidance, beyond fear and weakness?

As a way to work through what this might mean, we propose eight architectural strategies for re-occupying the Cape Cod house discussed earlier in this article for queer bodies, minds and hearts. These strategies are not exhaustive nor particularly rigorous, and are described in only schematic terms, but they offer modes by which the key programmatic formal and material components we have listed of the Cape Cod House can be attacked, made invalid, or *détourned* for queer uses. We seek to make of the Cape Cod House a site for our pain, our longing, our anger.

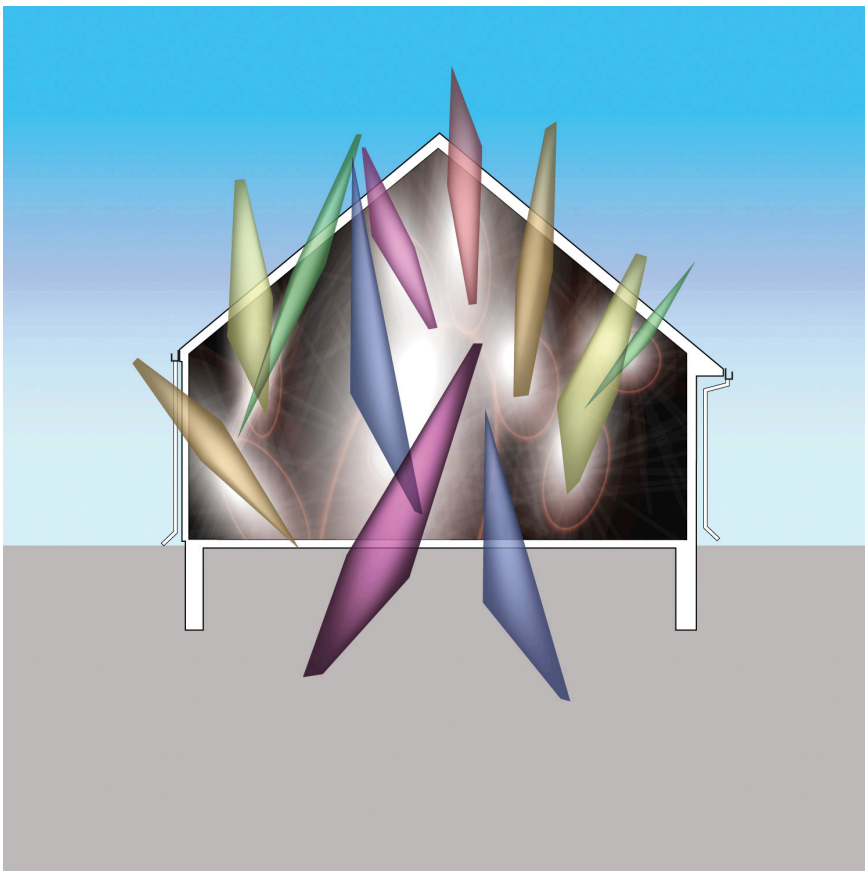
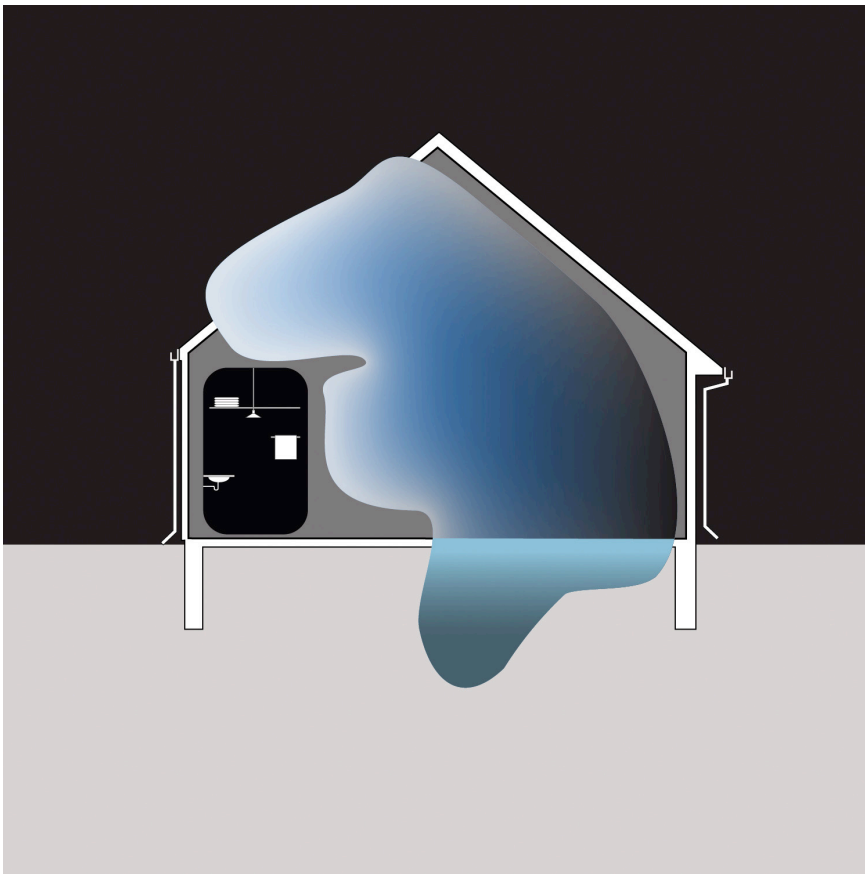
House One (dreams) inserts a pure interiority of *another* into the external frame of the Cape Cod House. It is an alien presence inhabiting the shell of its host. The insertion describes a container that is of and for the body, muscular in form in opposition to the rectilinear and industrial language of the host, and formed of materials that only exist in the imagination: structured of emotion, layered with dreams, surfaced with desire and the feathers of mythical birds and the skins of our lovers. We enter this queer world naked, through an antechamber where we remove the vestiges of the straight world, wash its dirt off our bodies, and store our outside selves. [Fig. 2]

House Two (shards) is a display of violence to the Cape Cod House that disrupts the form and function of the house and of the family. Function here is provisional: we sleep, we eat, we bathe, we fuck between the shards, opportunistically making use of space and objects as it comes to hand, as their position and being changes day to day. We work around the anger, living our lives anyway. [Fig. 3]

The shards are slivers, violent and dangerous, some material harder and clearer than glass, formed perhaps of the semen of the gods. When they fall to the ground they do not shatter, but penetrate the earth – we hear its moans. They bring light into the darkened interior, a light that is both milky and soft and at the same time hard and uncompromising. These shards are our souls.

Fig. 2: House One (dreams). Image: author.

Fig. 3: House Two (shards). Image: author.



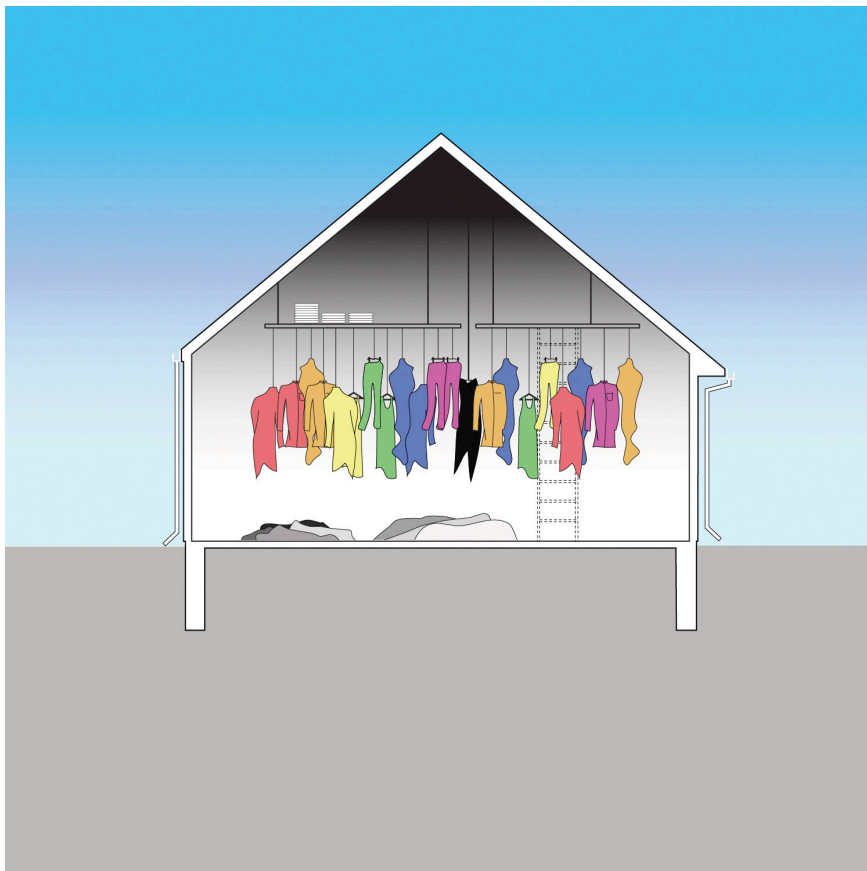
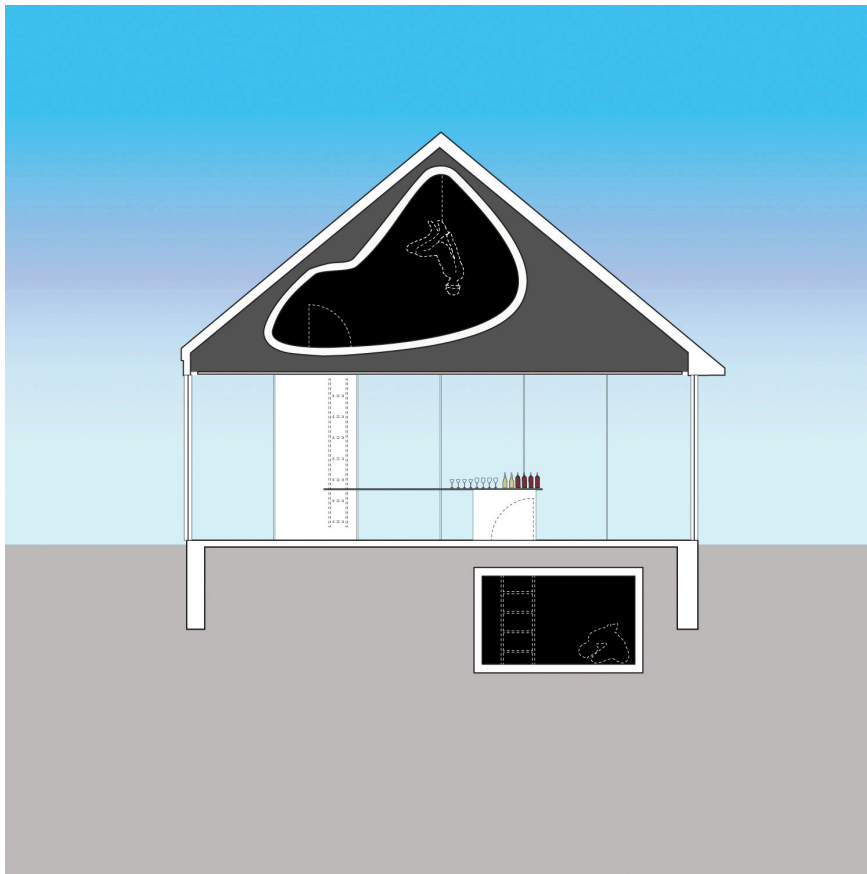
House Three (nightmares) replaces the exterior walls of the house, on all sides, with glass, transparent and open to view to all. The house has been opened, like our lives. Interiors are pristine white surfaces, and necessities of life are discretely hidden away in sleek white cabinets, inscrutable. We invite friends and neighbours for sophisticated garden parties, wine tastings with local cheese pairings. In some versions, a velvet curtain runs the perimeter: but in principal the curtain is never drawn. [Fig. 4]

Also hidden, away from view and from hearing, in anechoic soundproof cells above and below the party, are our darker secret fantasies, our psychic victims, our unspeakable carnal transactions, bound, gagged, stored away for future use.

House Four (identity) is a simple closet: we live between the rows of our identities, suspended from above from a complex machinery of wires, bars, chains and pulleys, like a crazed dry cleaner's shop, or like Duchamp's *Moules Malic*. We sleep on piles of underclothes scattered around the floor, or climb into the mechanism, impaling ourselves on the machinery. Memories and previous parts of ourselves come back to us as the machinery moves the clothes, as we try to find space among last year's linen pants and dressing gowns for our new identities. We live our lives surrounded by the smell of old clothes, the lingering and intoxicating scent of bodies, not all of which are our own. [Fig. 5]

Fig. 4: House Three (nightmares). Image: author.

Fig. 5: House Four (identity). Image: author.



House Five (infinity), maintains the internal divisions of the Cape Cod House, but lines each room and the outside of the house with mirrors. The material of the house is removed, the form rendered insubstantial. The interior becomes an infinite reflection of our infinite psychological being, with each space extending on forever in all directions. This house is the universe. [Fig. 6]

Each space becomes an infinite landscape, designated for a single use: bathing, sleeping, eating. The house becomes a maze, and we lose ourselves in it, unable to find anymore the entrances and exits, all of which have been hidden carefully or rendered only accessible with difficulty. This house, like all houses, is a prison, but an infinite and beautiful prison, and aside from chance encounters that may or may not ever happen, we cannot know if we are the only inmates.

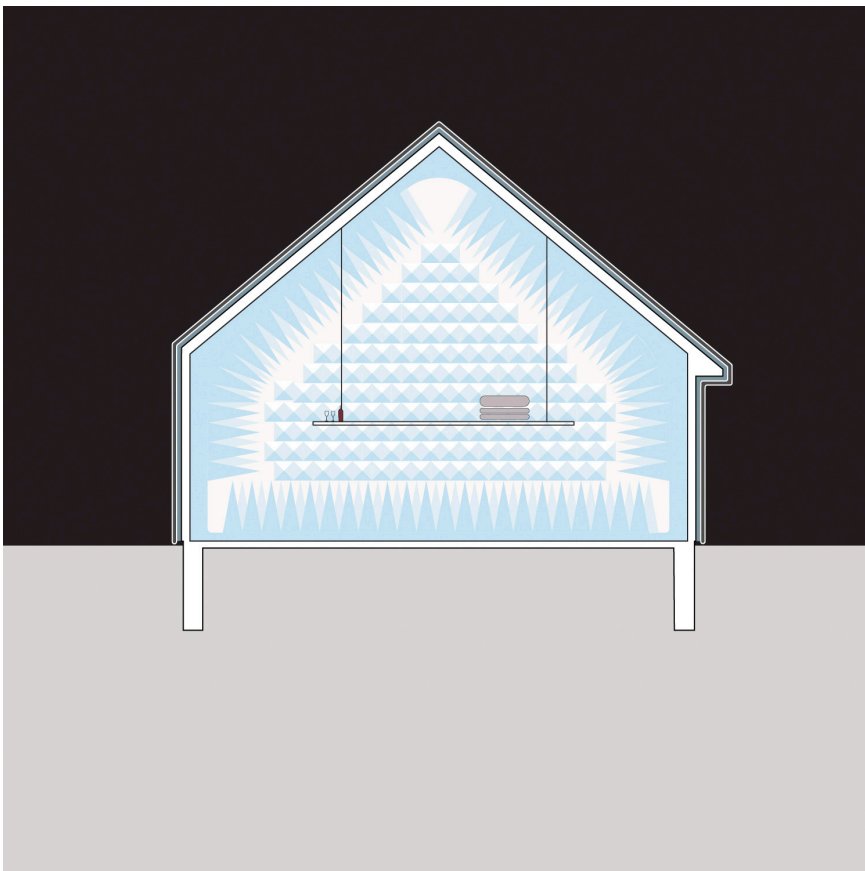
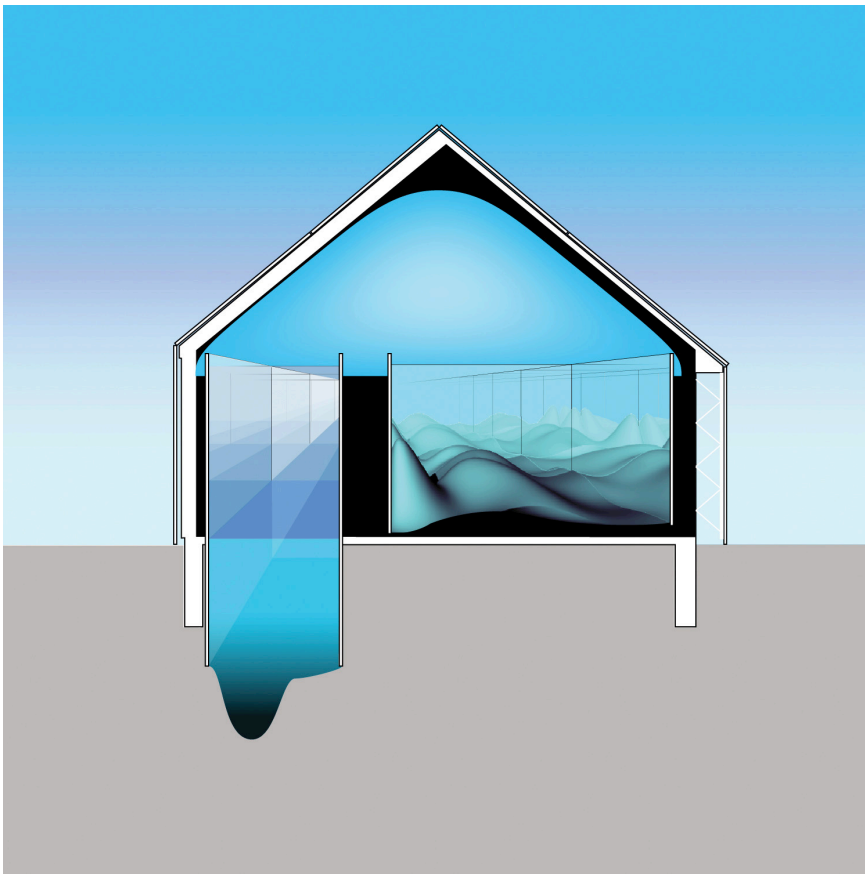
We cannot know either that in the interstices between the rooms, behind the mirrors, the guards are watching us.

House Six (silence) is an anechoic chamber: the walls and ceiling of the Cape Cod House are lined with sound absorbing foam, the exterior is covered with lead sheets. In the centre of the house is a mesh platform on which we live our lives, suspended in soundlessness. This house is not about secrets, about hiding ourselves from the world; instead, it is about silence, about finding a space in which the insults of the world cannot reach us. This is a house for being alone with our thoughts. Don't ask, don't tell. [Fig. 7]

Maybe this house could go further. Unknown to us, invisible to the inhabitant, the house has been outfitted with a finely tuned sensory net, able to detect, record and analyse the energy patterns in our brains. These patterns – our thoughts – are stored by the house for future use, or for broadcasting on the internet or indeed to the universe. Or to other minds, in other bodies, in other houses.

Fig. 6: House Five (infinity). Image: author.

Fig. 7: House Six (silence). Image: author.



House Seven (water): the ground floor is replaced with a pool of heavily saline water. We float on this surface, our bodily functions accommodated through a mechanism of tubes and wires connected to machines: food, wastes, orgasms. On a cloudless night, or occasionally on fine days if the sun is low, the roof opens like the wings of a butterfly, and we float beneath the stars. [Fig. 8]

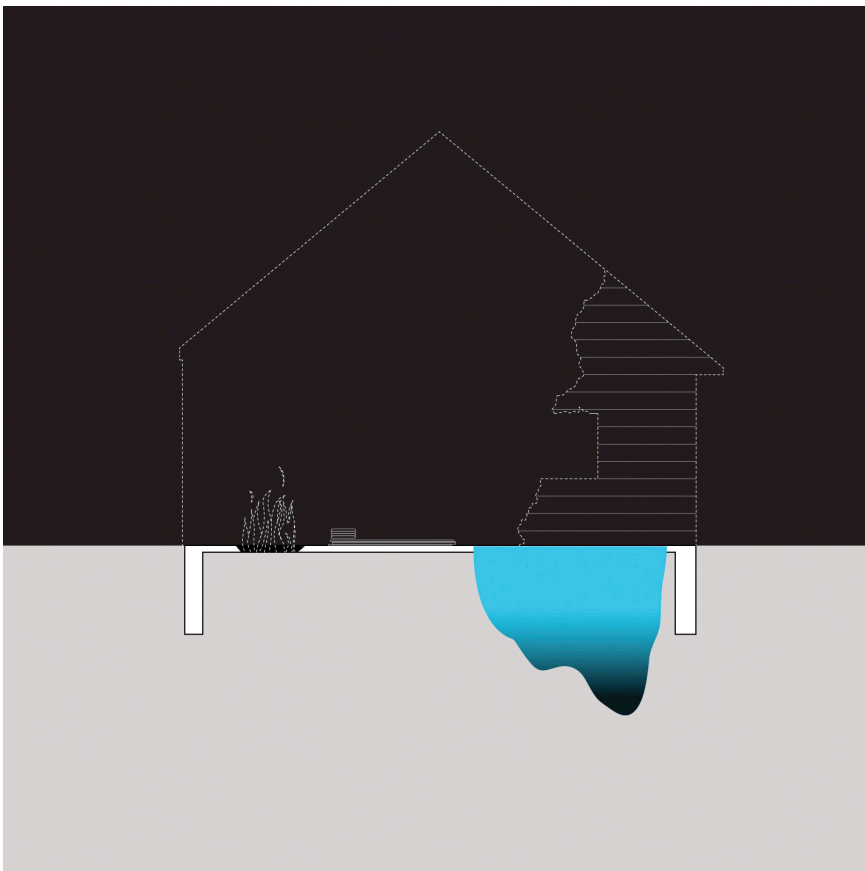
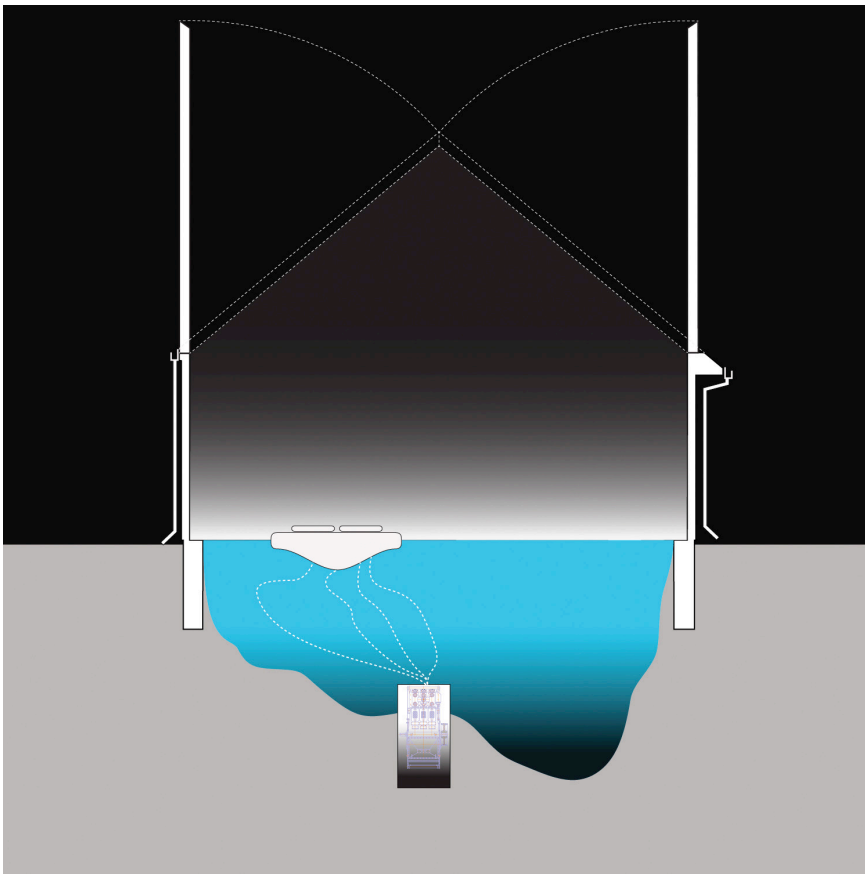
An alternative version of the floating house is not so calming. In this version, the laws of gravity are suspended within the house, and all objects – furniture, knives, dreams, lovers – float freely in the space.

Clearly, in this version the roof is not opened – or only once.

House Eight (fire), the Final House, or the House at the End of Time, takes the design argument to its logical conclusion. The Cape Cod House has been demolished – set on fire most likely, and there are likely remains of the house, burnt-out walls and rusted nails, asphalt shingles and stained carpets, on the site. Where the house once stood, we have placed the necessities for our new lives, unencumbered. [Fig. 9]

Fig. 8: House Seven (water). Image: author.

Fig. 9: House Eight (fire). Image: author.



Notes

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1. International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), *Yogyakarta Principles - Principles on the application of international human rights law in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity*, March 2007, <http://www.refworld.org> [accessed, 01 November 2017].
2. Gang of Four, *I Found that Essence Rare* (vinyl recording). London: EMI, 1979.
3. 'Levitt Adds 1950 Model to his Line', *Life*, May 22, 1950, p. 141.
4. Third world Gay Liberation, 'What we want, what we believe' in Timothy Patrick McCarthy and John Campbell McMillian (eds.), *The radical reader: A documentary history of the American radical tradition*. (New York: The New Press, 2003), 589–592.
5. This is a reference to a house that Jean Genet designed, and had built, in the late 1940s, in La Canette, near Cannes. The house was a gift to his lover, Lucien Sénémaud, on the occasion of Sénémaud's marriage to Ginette Chaix. Jacky Maglia was Chaix's son from a previous marriage, and lived in the house for many years. On a visit to the house in 2005, Maglia told me about the times Genet would come to stay, briefly, in the house, sleeping in a room with a view down the hill (which has now become the kitchen). The implication was that Genet was always on the lookout for the possible arrival of the police. According to Albert Dichy, in an interview from 2005, this was one of three houses that Genet designed, had built, and gave away to former lovers on their marriages to women. For more information about the house in La Canette, see Edmund White, *Genet: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 315.
6. This is a reference to a likely apocryphal story that recounts Genet's purported habit of always living in hotels, with a packed suitcase under the bed in case he needed to make a quick getaway. I have not been able to find a reliable source for this story.

Biography

Colin Ripley is a Professor in and Past Chair of the Department of Architectural Science at Ryerson University in Toronto. He is also a director of RVTR, which operates simultaneously as an award-winning architectural practice and as an academic research platform. He is the author or editor of several books and journal papers on a wide range of topics, including megaregional urbanism, responsive envelope systems, sonic architecture, Canadian modern architecture, and the modern concept of the house as understood through the writings of Jean Genet. Currently, he is working on a doctorate in Philosophy, Art and Critical Thought at the European Graduate School.