Privacy Reconfigured: Examining Public Interactions Within Domestic Space

Vanessa Poe

Follow this and additional works at: https://surface.syr.edu/architecture_tpreps

Part of the Architecture Commons

Recommended Citation
https://surface.syr.edu/architecture_tpreps/394

This Thesis Prep is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Architecture Dissertations and Theses at SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Architecture Thesis Prep by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.
PRIVACY
ReCONFIGURED
examining public interactions within domestic space

a thesis by Vanessa Poe
Table of Contents:

1. Thesis Contention  [04]
2. On Privacy  [07]
3. The Private House  [14]
4. Moving Forward  [30]
5. Glossary  [36]
1/

THESIS CONTENTION:

Domesticity in the twenty-first century is understood to be a secluded haven from the outside world. The private indoors was once a place for personal relationships and rituals that were kept out of the public. Overtime, the public has intruded into our private lives through webcams and social media, creating a blurred boundary between private life and public sharing which never existed before.

The Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated a potential future for social engagement, where our digital modes of communication become the major facilitator of public interactions. It also creates a new condition for preserving privacy, reconstructing relationships with spaces and their implied domestic roles through the introduction of the camera, an unrelenting public gaze into private domesticity. This thesis accepts that the present is embarking on a new relationship with the relativity of private space and public functions, and calls for a reconfiguration and refamiliarization within the London Townhouse typology to accommodate this eventual shift in domestic spaces.

Spaces that are typically private are broadcasted into a digital community, creating the opportunity to reveal the life of the private individual through broadcasting. Programmatic similarities or adjacencies create overlapping user groups, activities, and moments of display which can be exploited by the viewer, taking ownership of publicity through curation of views. Beatriz Colomina points out how modernism and mass media grew together and were intertwined in the mind of architects like Le Corbusier. Similarly, social media will further change the dweller’s relationship with their house and privacy (or lack thereof). Which makes me ask the question: If walls were created to remove actions from view, what is their role when the desire is for display?

A townhouse for a journalist can be a tool to rethink issues of privacy through means of reprioritizing programmatic needs in a post-pandemic future. Like a journalist, the future house must be a tool to help capture, curate, and disseminate private information to the public when working or socializing. The goal is to fundamentally rearrange our current understanding of the separations between public and private spaces by mediating the needs of the owner who's socially active career and personal isolated privacy would be at odds with one another in a typical domestic setting. As future conditions will force a greater removal from the public, the individual’s desire for public display and performance must be produced through the confines of their domestic setting and technology which reprioritizes the tension between permitted access and intrusive visibility through architectural design.

This thesis reconfigures private domestic spaces by combining modes of privacy in order to accommodate the needs of the townhouse, resulting in a new series of private reveals through socialization.
Social engagement can be mediated through various methods, but mainly can occur digitally from home, in public, or physically at home.

Digital communication allows privacy to be toggled with an on/off switch and curation of objects in the camera’s frame, while communication in face to face exposes a person’s entire private life through bringing an outsider in. In outdoor public spaces, one is entirely on display but so is the audience, creating an instance of total domestic privacy and total personal publicity.

The townhouse, like a private individual hides its inner nature from the public. The front elevations of terraced homes create a continuous front that fades into the urban landscape and individuality disappears in plain sight. The back of house can reveal the nuances and layers of use that have gone into the building, making it different from its neighbors. Similarly, the private individual uses a facade to behave in public and shield their private actions. Only after forging relationships and gaining access to the home can one start to uncover another’s private self.

PUBLIC INTERACTIONS

Public socialization places the private individual in a broadcasted setting where anyone can invade the privacy of the interaction or instance.

Exposure can only be mediated by leaving the setting and secluding oneself.

UNEQUAL RELATIONSHIP

Everyone on the scene has an equal opportunity to invade the privacy of the parties at the location.

Creates an instance of artificial publicity, where a person uses their public persona to behave in non-private spaces.

PRIVATE INTERACTIONS

Socializing face-to-face in a private setting puts the guest at a disadvantage since they are visiting a private space and rituals and actions are dictated by the private individuals.

The public individual’s privacy is still intact.

UNEQUAL RELATIONSHIP

The private individual is at a disadvantage in that the hidden aspects of the domestic self is revealed to the visitor but only as a static display.

The rituals and complete privacy is still preserved for both individuals.
NEW OVERLAPPED INTERACTIONS

SIMULTANEOUS RELATIONSHIP

The new overlapped condition creates moments of artificial invasions of privacy that occurred in public spaces previously.

An individual’s privately streamed conversation can still be interrupted by outside parties who are enacting private rituals forcing another layer of privacy to be revealed.

Both parties still additionally have the power to control or curate the broadcasted views and turn them off at any time.

DIGITAL INTERACTIONS

Communication broadcasts a person to their virtual audience and gives away hints of personal details through what is exposed in the background.

Exposure can be turned on or off, or curated at the individual’s discretion.

EQUAL RELATIONSHIP

Equality in the broadcasts because parties involved are equally exposing themselves, it is a mutual revealing of the private self.

Digital interactions are still more private and secure than other physical forms because it removes the degree of intrusions from parties outside of the socialisation or interaction.
The private townhouse is architecturally embedded with social norms and hierarchies. Since the urban housing in ancient Greece and Rome the domestic model served as a divider between the public masses and the private individuals as well as the upper and lower classes, and male and female societal roles.\(^4\)

The Greek model for urban living exhibits a sequence of thresholds that begin to separate these social groups: Men who visit the house are contained to the front portion (the most public) and women are remain in the back (the most private. This concept is carried over into the British townhouse where the front most part of the house remains the most public.

The degree of privacy also increases as one ascends the house, with the top most floor containing what is least desirable to be seen -- mainly staff sleeping quarters or storage space, implying a direct correlation between privacy and visibility. Dining and living rooms have a hearth and windows, while private living spaces only have views to the backyard creating a relationship between views, sequence, and social status.

The drawing room which is used for entertaining guests and day to day operations is a primarily female space, while the smoking room or study is a place for the man of the house to retire or host a friend. Resultantly, there is less ritual and staff ceremony involved in the less private spaces.

Historical precedents of townhouses show similar ideas while accommodating for additional needs of the clients. In Soane's house and museum the ground level floor is a display of domesticity while accommodating for the greater public needs. The museum and artifacts are in the back of the house forcing the outsiders to pass through glimpses of the private dwelling that surrounds it.

The Maison de Verre also mediates privacy through sequence as it serves as a doctors office and private house. All clients, guests, employees, and dwellers enter from the same door and the architectural forms and sequence deliver the outsiders to where they need to go. The grand stair is hidden in the daylight and revealed at night through glass panels which accommodates the needs of the owner: a gynecologist by day and socialite by night. By stacking programmatic difference, each floor becomes an island of similar function or access. The most private space of the homeowner is still public compared to that of the employee. Inversely, the most private space for the employee is never truly private since it is not owned by them.

**Back Exterior Wall:**
- views to backyard = views of people at work or family at play or relaxation
- least revealing to public
- requires deep relationship to access this threshold
- (like a Roman Domus sequence)

**Middle Threshold Wall:**
- transition between public and personal space
- no deep relationship required, only allows visual permeability not physical accessibility
- (like Domus and Prostas)

**Hearth Wall:**
- facing the front facade so is accessible to views
- gives visual access to more private living spaces beyond
- hearth is a place for gathering, warmth, ritual
- many openings since it is most public

**Front Exterior Wall:**
- views to front yard = views of people in public (see who’s coming)
- most light reached here
- most revealing to public
- requires little relationship with the owner/hosts
- doesn’t require a crossing of threshold
- closest to front of house
- first appearance of house “mask” and owner identity
- crossing initiates ritual
- staying outside maintains public space on private terms

**Vertical Thresholds in Townhouse**
- furthest from front door (most public exposure)
- little public ritual involved, guests might not even access this limit
- domestic ritual of engaging with family

- no ritual involved, mediated by personal choice to cross threshold (extension of existing rooms)

- social space requires ritual, therefore has a hearth for lengthy socializing
- bedrooms require prep. and ritual that servants do before bed
- personal rituals with hearth
THRID LEVEL
- Area of extra bedrooms, perhaps for guests, family, or service
- Attic Level
SECOND LEVEL:
- Third layer of intimacy with the guests, area for owner to sleep/be private
FIRST LEVEL:
- Second layer of intimacy with the guests, area to gather with them
- area for private study kept to the side away from guests
GROUND LEVEL:
- Engages with the public outside
- main transition space either going up if you are family or close friends or staying for a meal
BASEMENT LEVEL:
- Private living space turned into rec space
- could be additional service rooms

Private Spaces in the English Aristocratic Townhouse

HOMEOWNER:
- man with wealth and power
- aristocratic/upper class
- owns entire building and controls all actions on the property

FAMILY:
- wife and children (or none)
- aristocratic/upper class
- wife oversees all actions within the home

GUESTS:
- peers, colleagues, family friends, social circles
- aristocratic/upper class
- stays for dinner, cards, or overnight

EMPLOYEES:
- males for manual labor, females for interior tasks
- low/working class
- works in basement and lives in attic and remains “unseen”

Both employer and employee have nearly full access and degree of control over the functioning and rituals of the house in a reciprocal relationship. The owner dictates when rituals begin, and the employees dictate how they are carried out.
(3) Privacy:
Bedrooms are on a separate floor from the social/entertainment rooms
\(\rightarrow\) creates a major place to escape and rest and have discreet guests

(2) Privacy:
Bedrooms are on a separate floor from the social/entertainment rooms
\(\rightarrow\) creates a major place to escape and rest and have discreet guests

(1) Privacy:
Private Study off of the extended living spaces
\(\rightarrow\) creates a minor place to escape from gathering or easy access to socialize

(0) Privacy:
Kitchen, Pantry, and Bathroom off of the dining room
\(\rightarrow\) creates a separation between front and back of house performance of socializing/dining

(-1) Privacy:
Guest suite is below the "actual" house
\(\rightarrow\) creates a separation between familial house and guest house

(-1) Privacy:
Basement Spa
\(\rightarrow\) creates a separation between guest house and extension of the private familial house
Dutch House separates the permanent residents and their program from the temporary residents and theirs. The permanent living area is surrounded by glass creating an infinity of surroundings and contrasting the enclosed more private spaces. The scattering of program in section allows for privacy to exist in isolation and in groups.

Y2K House surrounds the public programs with the private, and creates a conditional and dynamic relationship between programatic needs. Spaces are considered private relative to one another, and materials facilitate an ability to see through the building making everything semi-public. The more walls and niches carved out, the more privacy one has in the overall mass of the building.
The house must reconfigure the current understanding of privacy as being driven by social class and standing. Conditions like preservation of public engagement, social distancing, integrated virtual display, and working from home will be the drivers of formal organization by overlapping and adjusting rituals that typically are independent of one another.

Drawing inspiration from Y2K house by OMA which is made up of transparent walls made opaque by doubling as storage for domestic clutter, one can start to imagine how visual permeability can construct views of the outdoors, reflections of interiors, or create layers of opacity to divide spaces.

This private townhouse should be situated in London. The British terrace house serves as the inspiration to many Western urban housing models throughout history, therefore it is fitting to do a townhouse in its place of origin.

Potential sites have been narrowed down through parameters of cultural importance, architectural typology, and history. As the house is a customized commentary on privacy for an individual it makes sense to have it also be a representation of affluence and the financial ability for one to separate themselves from others. Also like Broadsky’s crystal palace the potential for layering windows, or glass, or screens that from a distance present one thing and up close reveal another. Also this creates the potential to broadcast domesticity onto these layers that disguise the actual privacy taking place inside.
LONDON:
- Townhouses built as a secondary residence for aristocracy on the border of the city.
- Built as large mansions, taking up entire blocks.
- Eventually size breaks down and compartmentalizes due to:
  - Industrial growth leads to workers moving into the city.
  - Need for rapid housing model resulting in terrace house model.
  - Townhouse as a status symbol, with the ability to live in the nicer parts of the city, facing a park for status, cladding, and plazas within architectural vernaculars.
  - Townhouse as terrace house become adapted to upper-class people.
- Wealth can be shown through accumulation of visual location of site.

CAMDEN TOWN:
- Terrace home area.
- Active night scene.
- Young and renovating.
- Contrast of old and new architecture.

HOLBORN:
- Typical terrace homes (Soane).
- Near many squares relating to contextual site adjacencies.
- Historic/typical architectural types.
- Wealthier area.

THE STRAND:
- Historic relationship to townhouse.
- On the water (power and display).
- Heavy foot traffic.
- Iconic locations (Somerset House).

CHARING CROSS:
- Historic relationship with townhouses later converted into offices and stores.
- Trafalgar Square.
- Recommissioning the townhouse.
- Stair tower as architectural focus.

MAYFAIR:
- Particular townhouse style.
- Aristocratic relationship.
- Wealthy area (display).
- Adjacent to iconic locations.

KENSINGTON:
- Particular townhouse style.
- Aristocratic relationship.
- Socialite and wealthy area (display).
- Adjacent to iconic locations.

Programs for a Townhouse:
- **a private house**: the townhouse (domus, oikos) traditionally is a detached but present aspect of the public urban landscape offering the dweller the ability to participate at their own discretion with public life.

- **a display house**: the model house is embowed with certain expectations for behaviors and accessibility within domestic spaces, these accepted realities will become skewed when under speculation due to the public digitally intruding into the home.

- **an isolated house**: the home must provide a degree of public interaction while keeping specific areas hidden from access to maintain health and keep interaction with the community.

- **a safe house**: it is not safe to be outside for long periods of time due to: illness transmission, climate change, civil unrest which inspires the desire to remain at home and socialize from within designated safe spaces.

- **a working house**: the home must also provide amenities for the dweller to work – in this case someone who would typically be travelling most of the year and developing a large amount of information to sort down and share later with the public as well.

- **a social house**: the privacy is invaded by the internet more than face-to-face interactions making the frequency and nature of interactions increase forcing a new way to be socially active from home.

- **a family house**: the house must still overall provide for the domestic needs of the user and their guests, audience, viewers, etc. in every scenario (family, bachelor, couple, retired, etc.)

- **an urban house**: the house engages with the context and acts either like it’s neighbors and blends into the context creating an urban backdrop, or stands out in opposition and creates a beacon in the monotonous facades.

---

**Domestic Conditions:**

(according to Privacy ReConfigured)
General Terms:

- adjacencies:
  1. having a relation to something by being next to it
  2. similarities in spatial use, programatic operations, or physical location.

- domesticity:
  1. home or family life.
  2. pertaining to the actions carried out at home, the people who live there, and the rituals that take place; all occurring out of view of the general public.

- privacy:
  1. the state or condition of being free from being observed or disturbed by other people.
  2. the state of being free from public attention.
  3. related to the ability to isolate, disappear, and separate oneself from others.

- publicity:
  1. notice or attention given to someone or something by the media.
  2. the inverse of privacy; being in the public eye, under scrutiny of others.

- public space:
  1. notice or attention given to someone or something by the media.
  2. the inverse of privacy; being in the public eye, under scrutiny of others.

(according to Google Dictionary)
(according to Privacy ReConfigured)

- social media:
  1. websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking.
  2. technologies that are currently used (and will be used) to socialize through non-physical means. For example, Zoom, Instagram, Facetime, Facebook, etc.

- sequence:
  1. a particular order in which related events, movements, or things follow each other.
  2. the name for the order in which spaces are experienced architecturally.
  3. a tool for understanding the complexity, nuance, or changes of conditions as one travels through a space.

- terrace house:
  1. a house built as part of a continuous row in a uniform style; a row house.
  2. the typological source for the modern-day townhouse.

- townhouse:
  1. a tall, narrow, traditional row house, generally having three or more floors.
  2. a house in a town or city belonging to someone who has another property in the country.
  3. a slender home in an urban context that shares a facade and party walls with its neighbors. It is uniform in initial appearance but customizable in the interior and back of house.
Key References:


Other References:


Image References:


