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Situation Comedy, Domestic Situation: The Design of American Domesticity in Television Comedies

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Situation Comedy, Domestic Situation:
The Design of American Domesticity in Television Comedies

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors
Spring 2019

Honors Capstone Project in Architecture

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Abstract

In this paper, I examine the design of homes on television sitcoms and their relationship to reality and what viewers recognize as “home.” This is done through referencing sources from the realms of architecture and television/media studies. Additionally, multiple interviews with professionals in the production design industry inform many of the paper’s most important points. This serves as a companion piece to an architectural design thesis, which is a design of a space that combines living and television production programs. The aim of this is to ask how and why television homes are designed the way they are, and what they mean for viewers as a domestic ideal and for architects as both a “false” space and a space tailored for specific characters.

Executive Summary

This project examines the ways in which the television production industry constructs sets for situation comedies, or sitcoms, in order to create a home for a character or set of characters on the show. The various methods used by production designers, those who design these shows, will be examined. Overall, the goal is to determine how and why the false homes constructed in television are designed the way that they are, and use this to design a space for smaller independent crews to recreate a similar setting.

Towards this end, this paper is not a stand-alone project, but rather a companion piece to an architectural design thesis which aims to design a combined living/working situation in which a group of filmmakers live and produce a sitcom in the same space. This paper is a presentation of research and an examination of the field of production design as it relates to architecture. The design project, on the other hand, has a foundation in this research and has also been critiqued based on what I have learned about this field in order to make its design stronger.

This project has been the result of many forms of study and research. In addition to traditional research through texts and other sources including episodes of sitcoms themselves, I have interviewed three professionals in the production design industry, visited their union (the Art Directors Guild) and viewed multiple documents and drawings of sets in their archives, toured the sets of multiple shows, including watching an on-set rehearsal of *The Big Bang Theory*, and interviewed an independent filmmaker who has also acted in major sitcoms. This all took place during a research trip to Los Angeles. Additionally, a shorter trip to New York City involved seeing the locations that many shows set in New York City used or referenced, visiting the Paley Center for Media in order to view historic programs related to this topic, and visiting the Museum of the Moving Image to see their exhibits on production design. This paper only

reflects a portion of this research work, as it only includes the aspects which are most essential to my topic and well-suited to this format. Other portions that may not have made it into this paper have also influenced the design project. Production design for sitcoms is a wide field, of which I have only scratched the surface, and my goal is not an exhaustive overview of the discipline, but rather to look at how it presents domesticity from an architectural perspective.

My argument posits that the design of sitcoms create characters' homes that we, as the audience, interpret as being genuine. Though most viewers are likely aware that a show is being filmed in a set constructed for the purpose of filming this television program, while viewing we don't acknowledge this. Either consciously or subconsciously, we suspend our knowledge that this is not a real home and enjoy the show. Due to the closely-designed nature of these sets, they are able to produce a domestic environment that fits the characters and makes the viewer believe in the show's fiction.

There have been other examinations of the meaning and significance of homes on television, as well as artistic and architectural projects examining them. As such, this project is not necessarily unique in the area it occupies. However, while there are many in the field of production design who come from backgrounds in architecture, the disciplines themselves are entirely separate. Many people who have no knowledge or interest in architecture associate ideas of "home" with depictions of home from their favorite sitcom, and so it is important to recognize these sets as some of the most important domestic designs in term of recognizability and popularity.

While the influence of the media and television is not a new consideration in architecture—one of the most notable early examples dealing with this topic is Denise Scott Brown's 1971 essay "Learning from Pop"—this project is looking at sitcoms specifically in a

way that, to my knowledge, has not been addressed at length. I aim to use what I have learned about the field of production design, combined with my position as someone in an academic architectural environment, to explore what the idea of “home” means in this genre of popular culture.

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Finally, I would like to thank my parents: my father, for introducing me to Lucy, and my mother, for coming to my final thesis review. This is, of course, the tip of the iceberg.

Situation Comedy, Domestic Situation

The Design of American Domesticity in Television Comedies

For most of its history, the medium of television has been one that primarily reaches us when we are at home; whereas the movies have traditionally been thought of as a night out at a theater, the “small screen” approaches us on a daily basis and invites us to be entertained. As Marshall McLuhan wrote, “[t]he success of any TV performer depends on his achieving a low-pressure style of presentation, although getting his act on the air may require much high-pressure organization” (270). Television is often thought of as “light” entertainment, with the situation comedy, or sitcom, considered among the lighter genres of the medium: a weekly window (though, in the streaming age, this is an insignificant distinction) into the lives of a set of fictional characters, presented in a comedic fashion.

This viewpoint is certainly a fairly un-nuanced and reductive one, which ignores the fact that much of the great canonical artworks of civilization concern themselves with everyday life. However, I don’t aim to argue at length against this assertion, but rather to examine and analyze the ways that the designs of the sets of sitcoms act to convey this narrative to us as viewers. My focus is primarily with shows that show us characters in their domestic environment. When we watch and enjoy sitcoms, we acknowledge that we are seeing these characters going about their life in their living quarters—a depiction far less common in any other genre or medium. Lori Landay writes about this phenomenon in her book on *I Love Lucy*:

To be sure, television viewers were used to seeing the home portrayed in the movies and on radio, but level of detail in domesticity and intimacy in home life and marriage depicted in *I Love Lucy* went far beyond the representation in film. Looking at the first half-dozen episodes of the first season, we see many scenes played out in the Ricardo bedroom; in the pilot, we see Ricky shaving as if the camera were the mirror. Perhaps this focus on the bedroom was acceptable because [actors] Ball and Arnaz were married in real life. Nevertheless, there is time in the weekly half-hour sitcom to show the minutiae of everyday life in a way that is beyond the narrative conventions of film. (14)

However, echoing McLuhan's sentiment, these "false" living spaces, constructed for the camera by professionals, are designed and built with an acute attention to detail, each aspect meant to contribute to the sense of reality and to correspond to what would fit the characters. This produces the duality of a false domestic space being introduced into our real domestic spaces. Milly Buonanno, who in *The Age of Television: Experiences and Theories* challenges the perceived domesticity of television, writes that "[t]he domesticity of television...is a product of a 'domestication' of the medium: a domestication that has happened in a relatively short time but not without fears and controversy, nor without a considerable yet barely considered residuum of the small screen's extra-domestic presence" (14). There truly is nothing about the medium of television that makes it inherently domestic, besides perhaps the way it has been manufactured so as to be an item of household furniture (an issue Buonanno also addresses), but regardless, it has been a fixture of our homes for six decades and continues to introduce strange and familiar homes into them. Rather than characters entering into our domestic environment directly, we place their environment within our own. Television, then, is a window into different domestic architectures: spaces that don't truly exist beyond the screen but are emblematic of home to their viewers.

Mary Kay and Johnny (1947-1950), which is credited as being the first American network sitcom, doesn't seem to be a world away from today's shows. There is currently only a single episode from 1949 available to watch. It was filmed live and starred an actual married

couple (much like its more famous successor, *I Love Lucy*) playing a fictionalized version of themselves, Mary Kay and Johnny Stearns. However, were it not for the camera angles employed in the cinematography of the show, it would come across almost as a short comedic play that happened to be filmed—and, essentially, it is. The multi-camera sitcom, the most traditional format of the genre, is always essentially a stage play: the set is set up much as in a traditional theater, with one side open for the cameras and, usually, a live audience as well. *Mary Kay and Johnny* also features other notable similarities to its more famous successors: the couch is the center of attention and also roughly in the center of the room, so action can happen on, in front of, and behind it. The events (at least in this episode, though likely in most of them) take place entirely in the living room of the titular characters. In this episode, a door-to-door salesman—one indication that this is a seventy-year-old show—sells Mary Kay a cheap dust brush, and then, when Johnny claims he can get rid of the salesman, he sells Johnny an expensive vacuum (or “mechanical maid”). Johnny proceeds to dump the contents of an ashtray on the rug so he can prove its worth, and offers to eat them if it can’t; Mary Kay responds by bringing him a knife and fork and telling him the building’s electricity has been shut off. Save for a minor introductory plot about sock darning, that’s about it.

The architecture of the home is rarely, if ever, the focus of a sitcom. However, it always serves a necessary function. In *Mary Kay and Johnny*, there’s a door on the left for visitors to enter, and a door on the right for the couple to go to another room in the apartment. There’s also a bay window in the back of the scene with an (obviously faked) view of Greenwich Village that Mary Kay points out to the salesman. The overall layout isn’t that different from many multi-camera sitcoms of today.

The fact is, the version of American domesticity as presented on the small screen is often a tremendously simplified one, and this is perhaps truer in the situation comedy than it is in other genres that are often taken more seriously. This disparity has, in many ways, been decreasing over the years; as budgets and production possibilities got bigger, the single-camera format became more popular and did away with the live audience, and independent filmmakers produce their work in actual domestic spaces, often their own. However, many multi-camera shows are still produced. In many cases, these still occupy the domestic space in our wider cultural consciousness, as single-camera shows often expand further outside of the home and independently filmed content works with actual homes. For viewers, an actual living space doesn't represent home—they *have* an actual living space, one they are likely dissatisfied with. Instead, they want an idealized home, designed to fit perfectly around its fictional inhabitants.

Episodes from the first few seasons of *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957), early television's most iconic export, are often contained within the apartment of the Ricardos, and rarely venture outdoors when they do leave their apartment. Over the course of the series, however, the interaction between the characters and the outside world got far more complicated. When the Ricardos lived in New York, their apartment (which changed once from a smaller to a larger apartment in the same building) was always the central point of the show. However, over the course of the show it shifted multiple times: one season was based in Los Angeles and the hotel room they stayed in for an extended period, one was spent traveling around Europe, and, at the end of the show, they finally moved from New York to suburban Connecticut. After the show technically ended, it was replaced by a series of hour-long specials which featured the same characters based in their Connecticut home. However, this was also not limited to this locale, with one episode notably set in Japan. Despite travels, however, Lori Landay writes that

“[t]hroughout the series, the home is the site of the characters’ relationships, especially between Ricky and Lucy but also between Lucy and Ethel, between the two couples, and less often, between Ricky and Fred” (17).

It is a testament to *I Love Lucy* that it was able to survive in a variety of locales and didn’t completely lose its flavor and familiarity in the multiple moves. However, the New York years are probably still considered the most iconic of the show, and perhaps this is precisely because of the focus on the apartment: when Lucy was in Los Angeles, she was at Grauman’s Chinese Theatre; when she was in Italy, she was stomping grapes. When she was in New York, however, she remained at home, a home which became dearly familiar to millions of viewers. (Landay’s characterization of the later seasons of the show differs from mine here, as she writes that in Hollywood “their hotel suite becomes the major locale” [17]; I don’t necessarily disagree that the bulk of the time was still in the home, but rather the subjects of specific episodes were increasingly outside of the home and focused on specific landmarks and geography.) This doesn’t mean her New York home was entirely realistic, however. Her address, 623 East 68th Street, is famously “in the middle of the East River” (Friedman 73).

When compared with the shows that have achieved a similar iconic status in the decades since, *I Love Lucy* traveled to an extent that wouldn’t be repeated in most other sitcoms. One likely reason for this is the fact that the homes of characters are often as recognizable as the characters themselves, and so to separate these characters from their homes would be to greatly alter the perception of them and lose a sense of familiarity. Plenty of shows still feature characters moving, to be sure, but few move between cities, continents, and modes of urbanity the way *I Love Lucy* did. Additionally, because the New York locale was not the focus of the

early series the way the Hollywood and European locales later were, it could be seen as a more universal home for the American public.

Broad City (2014-2019), a single-camera sitcom which recently finished its fifth and final season, boasts an interesting relationship to the city in many regards. One of its two main characters, Abbi, is a struggling artist living in the Astoria area of Queens; however, her address is not said. At one point, she leases her apartment to visitors and leaves them a hand-drawn map that closely mirrors real life. It positions her apartment at 34th Street and what can be surmised as 35th Avenue, down the street from a movie theatre. In real life, that cinema is part of the Kaufman Astoria Studios complex, coincidentally also home to the titular studio (where *The Cosby Show*, among others, was filmed) and the Museum of the Moving Image. Abbi's apartment also represents one of the relatively rare times a supposed apartment location and the accompanying establishing shot (almost) match: her map positions her apartment at the northeast corner of the intersection, which in real life is a dialysis clinic, but at the southwest corner is 3506 34th Street, which can actually be seen in the show as the exterior of her apartment.

Whereas single-camera shows, such as *Broad City*, are usually produced on a higher budget and with more extensive sets (or even on location), multi-camera shows maintain the live theater feel of the early days of television and are set up accordingly. While single-camera sets are often more literal reproductions of real architecture, essentially constructing full rooms, multi-camera sets require more ingenious ways to fit the entirety of a room into a flattened three-wall space, and have to be designed in a way that acknowledges the camera will almost always be filming from one side of the room.

One production designer and art director that I interviewed was John Shaffner, well-known for working on many multi-camera sitcoms including *Friends*, *George Lopez*, *Two and a*

Half Men, The Big Bang Theory, Mike & Molly, and Mom. Like many designers who work in multi-camera production, his educational background is in theater design, while many single-camera designers come from architectural backgrounds. His work has also included designs for various live events, and when I talked to him, he and his partner, Joe Stewart, were working on the design for Diana Ross's 75th Birthday Celebration.

Shaffner's most iconic work is the main apartment of *Friends* (1994-2004), which, for most of the series, belonged to Monica Geller. Though the apartment is one that has been criticized for its large size, explained away in the series as being a rent-controlled inheritance from a grandmother, Shaffner says it was based off of an apartment that he and his partner lived in years ago. Like this apartment, it was set as a sixth-floor walkup in Manhattan—which he credits as being one of the main reasons for its size. In addition to often being large, Shaffner notes that top-floor apartments in buildings without elevators were often much cheaper than other apartments in the same neighborhood, but that the average viewer, who likely had never lived in New York, wouldn't know that. This also was used as part of a joke inspired by the 1967 film *Barefoot in the Park*. Like the film, the first few episodes of *Friends* featured a joke where “people came to the door huffing and puffing—but that got old fast” (Shaffner).

Friends primarily featured one central room, onto which opened multiple doors, a format Shaffner describes as well-fitted to comedy. It's not hard to imagine why—the main characters are all in one area and there are many different directions they can appear from or disappear to at opportune times. This also contributed to the apartment's size in multiple ways. The space needed to accommodate all six main characters at once, not to mention side characters, within the same space. Shaffner says that part of the idea behind the set design was that the apartment originally had the kitchen and living room separate, but that Monica had knocked down a wall to

create an open floorplan, which left some exposed wood framing in the final set design. There also needed to be space at the front of the set for four cameras to film, the industry standard for multi-camera shows (though earlier shows such as *I Love Lucy* only used three).

The filming of the space also contributes to the way it is perceived. Shaffner in particular talked about the filming style of James Burrows, who directed the pilot and some early episodes: “he liked to bring cameras close to sets so they didn’t feel as big.” He often utilized the front four feet of the set: this space is often left fairly open in most sets, so that the camera can enter and film from a closer perspective, as Burrows did. However, as the show went on, other directors often went the quicker and easier route of showing the whole set and ensemble cast in one shot. Burrows also affected the design of the space in a subtle way: there was a post that was part of the aforementioned wooden framing that he liked to use in the framing of his shots, but as other directors took over, they got rid of it so it wouldn’t block the camera’s view. However, when he returned as director for a few later episodes, they needed to find this post so he could use it. Shaffner even remarked that they had to rebuild this post for him once or twice.

Sitcoms are built around their main characters, so their living spaces have to be reflections of these characters’ personalities. On *Friends*, Shaffner discussed small touches related to this, like how Monica upgraded her kitchen appliances at one point due to her profession as a chef. However, we discussed it in more depth with regards to some of his other shows. One of these was *Dharma & Greg* (1997-2002), a show famous for depicting an “opposites attract” couple, with Dharma and her family espousing hippie bohemianism with Greg, a straight-laced lawyer, coming from a country-club background. In the first season, they lived in a small apartment with an open floorplan and a bedroom loft, though this was changed afterwards as producer Chuck Lorre didn’t think it worked well for the show. Their later

apartment was a more conventionally laid-out apartment in the same building, with an open floorplan as well but without a loft. It was supposedly in a converted industrial building, and as Shaffner describes it, the decoration mostly came from Dharma's end. Greg's more reserved character would've let her have her way, but would also have the old-fashioned, conservative viewpoint that it was more of a wife's than a husband's job to decorate their apartment.

Prominent side characters in *Dharma & Greg* included both sets of the couple's parents. Dharma's parents, products of the Woodstock generation, lived in one of the most unusual homes ever featured on mainstream American television, what Shaffner describes as "a geodesic dome with a country kitchen." Dharma's childhood bedroom featured strange built-in furniture and a trampoline bed, reflecting the values of the free-spirited family.

Another Lorre show Shaffner worked on, *Two and a Half Men* (2003-2015), also reflected an incorporation of a character's personality into the architecture of the show. The show centered on Charlie Harper, who takes in his brother Alan and Alan's son Jake after a divorce. Charlie Harper as a character is full of negative attributes, most notably an intense misogyny which made the show deservedly controversial, but also an addictive personality and an attitude towards his brother that ran the gamut from annoyance to seething hatred. However, the show often highlighted the fact that Charlie had a "heart of gold;" that under his detestable exterior, he was truly a caring man. Additionally, on the surface he could often be charming and charismatic, a trait echoed in the role's actor, Charlie Sheen. So, for the Harper residence, this is the side of his personality that ended up being represented. Initially, Shaffner had thought of putting the character in a house that was "oddly shaped, with angled walls," and remarked that his character would seem like the type to live in something modernist, but that Lorre dissuaded him from this direction. Instead, the house reflected the homey and friendly traits of Charlie

(both Harper and Sheen). As Shaffner describes it, the final design was a “Spanish colonial beach house [which] gives a sense of time and California history; that was comfortable-looking, inviting, and casual,” citing houses along the Pacific Coast Highway as inspirations. As an aside, it is also worth noting that after the first season of the show, the width of the living room was reduced by an appropriate distance of about two and a half feet, as it was felt to be too large. Shaffner noted that sometimes comedy that works well in smaller spaces “evaporates in larger spaces.”

One of the times Shaffner did take the modernist route, however, was for a show that has been largely forgotten in the annals of television history except as a footnote. *Joey* (2004-2006), the short-lived spin-off to the hugely successful *Friends*, featured the show’s resident lovable fool transplanted from an unimpressive apartment shared with Chandler in New York to a comparatively luxurious house in Los Angeles. The house for this show was a Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired midcentury modernist house arranged on a triangular grid, which Shaffner notes would have seemed very alien to most TV viewers. Indeed, distinctively modernist houses in sitcom shows have been few and far between (with *The Brady Bunch* and *Modern Family* being two notable exceptions, though neither features an organization as irregular as *Joey*), and it was a complete removal from the location, aesthetic, and economic group depicted in *Friends*. He also describes what he believes was a mistake in the design: a fireplace that was far too large. He added that it never served any significant staging or plot purpose, and so it was just a large waste of space. It is interesting, however, in that it brought back a design feature that had been much more present on television in the mid-century era this house supposedly hails from, though it has

certainly been less omnipresent in actual homes as well. As Rem Koolhaas¹ writes in the *Fireplace* installment of his *Elements* series, the fireplace is now a “nostalgic luxury, redundant but cherished,” and “may become the first architectural element to become extinct, necessarily so” (3).

Returning to *Two and a Half Men*, a notable change occurred when Charlie Sheen’s boozing jingle composer was replaced by Ashton Kutcher’s tech billionaire, Walden Schmidt. At first, this barely changed the set, but eventually, it was decided that the look of the home needed to be overhauled. Shaffner notes that then-trendy materials such as slate and subway tile were incorporated, as well as what he describes as a trend of light gray paint that he also incorporated in a recent remodel on *The Big Bang Theory*. As for the décor, he describes a Restoration Hardware airplane wing desk as being the first piece selected and as being an impetus for a house full of modern and contemporary furniture.

Like *Joey*, one show that Shaffner currently works on, *Mom* (2013-present), also features a design element that brings older television homes to mind. The kitchen pass-through window as seen in the show’s current main set, once a staple in shows such as *I Love Lucy* and *The Jeffersons* (1975-1985), has been a victim of the open floorplan trend in recent decades, but it has reappeared on *Mom*. “It’s clichéd, but sometimes I can convince them [to use it]” (Shaffner). Regarding *Mom*, he notes a design tendency he has incorporated into many of his designs: featuring more windows upstage, as opposed to on the side walls downstage. When you do this, he says, you lose fifteen to twenty feet of space that could be used for an adjacent set on the stage, as you need backdrops and possibly exterior props such as trees. *Mom*, however, often

¹ Given that this series of books has a lengthy list of contributors it is likely not Koolhaas himself writing, at least not entirely; the series particularly credits Sebastien Marot for *Fireplace*.

features scenes at the front door and as such has a set showing the exterior of the front of the house, so it can accommodate side-wall windows.

One aspect of production design in sitcoms that all the professionals I talked to elaborated on was “swing sets,” or sets constructed for use in a single episode. There are also recurring swing sets, which appear in a number of episodes. While most sitcom episodes have at least one swing set, the number and extent of these varies greatly, with popular shows having larger budgets to produce more. “If it’s a short-use, one-episode set, you don’t have to be as cognizant of future needs,” Shaffner said. However, sometimes plans can change. He pointed out to me a bistro set on *Mom* that is used frequently, and which had previously been a café on *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-present) and a pawn shop on *Two and a Half Men*. The café ended up making a return on *The Big Bang Theory*, so it had to be rebuilt for that show. When a program ventures outside the home, however, it is often into a swing set.

Another professional I interviewed was Suzanne Feller-Otto, whose most prominent work was as set designer for much of *Seinfeld* (1989-1998), working under production designer Thomas Azzari. Now, she teaches production design at the American Film Institute. By the time she came on the show at the start of the third season, the permanent sets, such as main character Jerry Seinfeld’s apartment and Monk’s Café, had been designed, but she worked on the occasionally-seen apartments of main characters George Costanza and Elaine Benes (her second apartment, as the first was merely a stock set). She also worked on many swing sets. As she describes, she estimates that, upon her arrival in the third season, each episode had two to three swing sets, one or two of which were new construction, with rentals filling in other needs. However, she estimates that by the fifth season, they were up to a maximum of twenty-two swing sets in use per episode, with as many as five being constructed specifically for that

episode. However, despite the large number of sets used, she describes Azzari's philosophy as being that the sets merely needed to be background, with actors taking precedence. Feller-Otto herself notes that she thinks of scripts in set design the same way that architects think of program: the driver for design, and what determines the necessity and uses of spaces.

Feller-Otto describes what she considers one of the most ingenious recurring swing sets that she and Azzari ever worked on for *Seinfeld*: George Steinbrenner's office. During the period when George Costanza worked for the New York Yankees, he was occasionally called to the office of Steinbrenner, the real-life owner of the Yankees (though he didn't play himself, with show co-creator Larry David providing the fictional Steinbrenner's voice). The camera in these brief scenes was always behind Steinbrenner, sitting at his desk, facing the door where George would enter. Since this was the only angle required, the set essentially consisted of a single wall covered in woodgrain wallpaper with a triangle of carpet extending to the camera, with the desk and office furnishings in between. Feller-Otto left after *Seinfeld*'s seventh season to work on the single-camera comedy-drama *Ally McBeal*, a show she describes as being much more finely detailed in its sets than *Seinfeld* (and a show famous for its absurdist visual digressions, such as two characters in a giant cup of coffee in the pilot).

The Steinbrenner set illustrates well a tenet of production design: if it isn't shown onscreen, it shouldn't be built. This sounds simple, but at times is, in reality, strangely complex. When I toured the set of *The Goldbergs* (2013-present), a single-camera sitcom, for example, it feels for the most part like an authentic house in the Philadelphia suburbs where the show is set. I grew up less than fifteen miles from its location, and even though the show supposedly takes place in the 1980s, it often reminds me of my hometown. Since single-camera shows often use a wide variety of different angles and vantage points, the entire house's interior feels real and

authentic. Looking at the front of the house, the area surrounding the front door is fully finished, but the rest of the façade is bare: two large windows, seen from the interior behind the couch, are surrounded by bare wood framing. This is a recurrent theme across the sets I saw, both single-camera and multi-camera. For reasons of both budget and time, if it isn't shown on-screen, there is no reason for it to be built.

On a similar note, if it is shown on-screen, in all likelihood it *was* built for the show. That is to say: it is almost always easier to recreate something in the studio rather than shoot on location. Another designer I talked to, Jerry Dunn, elaborated on why this is: as soon as something is shot outside of the studio compound, it suddenly involves an ever-growing fleet of vehicles and workers. There's also the fact that, when filming inside a business, they must be compensated enough to be amenable to closing. So, for the episode of *The Big Bang Theory* that we watched a read-through of, John Shaffner described how he had to recreate the Griffith Observatory—itsself less than ten miles from the studio.

One aspect of sitcom homes that often strikes viewers is the presence of walls that seem abnormally angled. Shaffner discussed the need to fit “everything you need in a four-wall room in a three-wall set,” which can get even trickier with shows that feature a combined living room and kitchen. “You can start with the side walls being perpendicular to the camera aisle, which helps with entrances and doors and getting sets closer together on stage, but as you go upstage, then you can start doing some jigs and jogs and angles so you get more square footage of wall,” which is often necessary in order to fit in windows, doors to other rooms and closets, and other essential architectural elements (Shaffner). He also describes the necessity for at least two main entrances—one from outside the home, and one going to another room inside the home. If the kitchen is a separate room, then there's often a third entrance to accommodate that. Though it

looks strange on paper, these complexly angled homes offer more space to map out the various rooms of a home. The idea of every room in an apartment or house opening onto the living room seems unnecessary and even strange in the context of an actual home, but on television, it's a way to make the layout of a home explicitly visible. Add onto this the fact that nothing can be on the fourth wall, because it doesn't exist, and you end up with a reasonable reason to try to increase the amount of wall surface area.

Jerry Dunn, however, discussed the drawbacks of these types of designs. They were very popular in the 20th century, and Dunn cites the 1980s, around the beginning of his career, as an era rife with these designs. "They were forcing the picture—in the 4:3 format, they had to force it inward to fit it into frame" (Dunn). However, in the widescreen era, it might come off as more antiquated. "If you see one now, it's more likely a design feature" (Dunn). As he noted, though, this doesn't diminish the challenges in designing a three-walled space. As he notes, many designers who try to shift from single-camera to multi-camera have trouble, because single-camera sets are more realistic replications of spaces, and removing part of the set to get a certain camera angle can be accommodated.

Our discussion also covered the theatrical links of the multi-camera sitcom: as he describes it, most of them film weekly on Friday nights, so for the live audience it's like attending a play. The theatrical ties were even more evident in the early days of television, as in the aforementioned *Mary Kay and Johnny* and other mid-century shows. "If you watch *The Honeymooners* [1955-1956]," Dunn notes, "when [Jackie Gleason] slams the door, the walls shake, because they were made of stretched muslin flats, like those used in theatre." (This was part of the modest set for the decidedly working-class show; as David Sterritt notes in his book on the show, with "the minimalism of its design" it uses "a principal setting marked by a

brooding sense of social claustrophobia. A certain degree of audiovisual modesty was built into early television...but *The Honeymooners* went uncommonly far in making a virtue of this necessity” [59]).

Dunn has worked on a multitude of multi-camera shows, with his first job as an art director coming in the last years of *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992) in the early 1990s. It’s a daunting prospect—inheriting an iconic show, a veritable American media institution, in its closing seasons. However, as he says, by that point the show was so iconic that his changes to the main set were minimal. “Bill [Cosby] hated the kitchen from the original design, so I had to redesign the kitchen. At another point he added a small office to the brownstone for his wife” (Dunn). He did have to produce swing sets for the show during this period, though we discussed the fact that the number of these produced was usually smaller at that time. Over the past three decades or so, the number of swing sets produced for shows has increased, especially with shows that become popular and have large budgets. He estimates that *The Golden Girls* may have only had one swing set per episode, while *How I Met Your Mother* became a show featuring multiple different locations in almost every episode. *Seinfeld* is an example of a show that falls in the middle both chronologically and quantitatively.

The Cosby Show maintained its legacy up until Cosby’s public fall from grace in recent years and subsequent imprisonment, having been credited with achievements such as being “the show that revived the domestic sitcom genre” (Real and Bratslavsky 150) and providing an example of “the perfect father figure” working against negative stereotypes towards black men (Real 232). Focusing on the wealthy Huxtable family and its patriarch Cliff, the home shown was supposedly a brownstone at 10 Stigwood Avenue (a nonexistent street) in Brooklyn Heights. It was a display “not only of wealth but also Afrocentricity and family functionality” (Friedman

19). Interestingly, the show was filmed entirely in New York City but mostly outside of Brooklyn: while production originated at the NBC Studios in Brooklyn, it moved to Kaufman-Astoria Studios in Queens after three seasons (Fuller 24). Even the brownstone exterior is from Greenwich Village, Manhattan. However, the very fact of the show being filmed in the New York City area instead of Los Angeles area was unusual.

While Dunn and I discussed the show's groundbreaking portrayal of an affluent African American family—a big departure from previous shows such as *The Jeffersons*, which defined their characters “in relation to Whiteness” (Real and Bratslavsky 151)—Dunn linked the show to a trend he called “heightened reality.” Perhaps the best word that he used to describe this trend is “aspirational.”

Broadly speaking, in the 1980s and into the 1990s many shows featured sets that seemed too nice, or beyond the realistic budget of their characters. Dunn cites shows such as *The Golden Girls* (1985-1992), *Frasier* (1993-2004), and *Friends* as belonging to this trend, with *Roseanne* (original run 1988-1997; a show whose pilot he decorated) being the harbinger of the end of this era. Another show that he tied into this was *Full House* (1987-1995).

Dunn talks about how he expected *Fuller House* (2016-present), the revival of *Full House*, to be one of his easiest jobs ever, as the producers of the show initially told him that they had the drawings of the original show's main set. However, they later realized the drawings had been trashed, and so it turned into one of his hardest jobs, as he and his assistant had to take screenshots of various *Full House* reruns for hours in order to be able to get all the details right. “Trying to watch television and recreate a Victorian house is a monster, it's impossible. When we started building we kept noticing mistakes we had made” (Dunn). On top of this, the lighting used in the show at times made it harder to guess colors, as the same wall would look drastically

different in various episodes. “The living room was probably a third bigger in the original series, but I didn’t have the room on the physical stage in order to have space for swing sets” (Dunn). He also convinced the producers to remodel slightly, most notably taking out an angled wall, reflecting his sentiments expressed earlier.

Dunn also worked on numerous children’s sitcoms for the Disney Channel between 2003 and 2011—*That’s So Raven*, *Cory in the House*, *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody*, *The Suite Life On Deck*, and *Hannah Montana*. These shows are interesting in that they also feature a version of “aspirational living” as found in late-20th century sitcoms, but with a distinctive slant. While Dunn acknowledged that children’s shows aren’t as reality-grounded as general sitcoms, there is the added layer that three of these shows had specific living concepts, as expressed by their titles: the “House” of *Cory in the House* is the White House, *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody* was based in a hotel suite, and its spin-off *The Suite Life On Deck* was set on a cruise ship.

Finally, for a different perspective I interviewed Brian Jordan Alvarez, an actor and independent filmmaker. He directed, wrote, produced, and starred in the comedy web series *The Gay and Wondrous Life of Caleb Gallo* (2016), a show he describes as “almost a spoof” of multi-camera sitcoms, and has also acted in mainstream sitcoms such as *Will & Grace*, *Grace and Frankie*, and *2 Broke Girls*. Virtually all of his own work is filmed in his own home and the homes of friends, and he writes scripts with this in mind, consciously writing for settings that he knows he has access to. However, his work on large-budget mainstream productions has made him increasingly cognizant of what can be faked: for example, in *Caleb Gallo*, a scene that supposedly took place in a hot spring actually used tall grass along with some dry ice to hide the fact that none of the actors were even sitting in water. His real home was used as both Caleb’s home on the show and, shot from a different angle with some redecoration, as the home of

Caleb's academic advisors. He also describes how, on occasion, he has tried to shoot in a style resembling multi-camera shows by restricting the movement of a camera to a mostly linear path back-and-forth, mimicking the front-facing nature of multi-camera sets. However, when I asked him what he thought about filming in real domestic spaces versus constructed sets, he expressed his opinion that the lack of design and use of real spaces in independent shows such as *Caleb Gallo* can often make for more honest or real acting.

“Households were favored settings for sitcoms from the beginning...[t]he visual appearance of such shows grew organically from their quotidian subjects,” David Sterritt writes in his book on *The Honeymooners*. To a large extent, this remains true today. Even as the television viewers of today are bombarded with an impossibly long list of series available to watch at their fingertips, many of them still choose to tune in to a genre that has been ubiquitous in American popular culture since the Truman administration. Viewers have been constantly tuning in to see updates in the daily lives of characters that they love, hate, or simply find relatable; this aspect of the genre remains true regardless of the show's setting, whether it be a domestic sitcom as focused on here or one that takes place at work (*The Office*), in a bar (*Cheers*), or on the warfront (*M*A*S*H*, if one can truly consider this a sitcom; *Hogan's Heroes*, if one can't). However, in looking at these shows of domesticity, we as viewers are seeing the homes of these characters as designed for the camera by professionals. In the same way that Denise Scott Brown once wrote that the backgrounds of pickle advertisements and soap operas “represent someone's...idea of what pickle buyers or soap opera watchers want in a house” (27), sitcoms represent someone's idea of what sitcom watchers want in a *home*, including both a house and the relationships seen within it. Each series is a new vision of domesticity; though none of them are real, each constitutes a way to view domestic life as filtered through the

television industry. As cultural texts, they remain the primary mode to see what an American idea of “home” is, because they give us both explicitly laid-out spaces and sets of developed characters to associate with these spaces. As architectural designers, then, we would be wise to look at these homes. Rather than representing an architectural ideal, they represent the physicalization of a character, a home form-fitted to a personality. In this way, they are likely more real than many actual American homes.

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