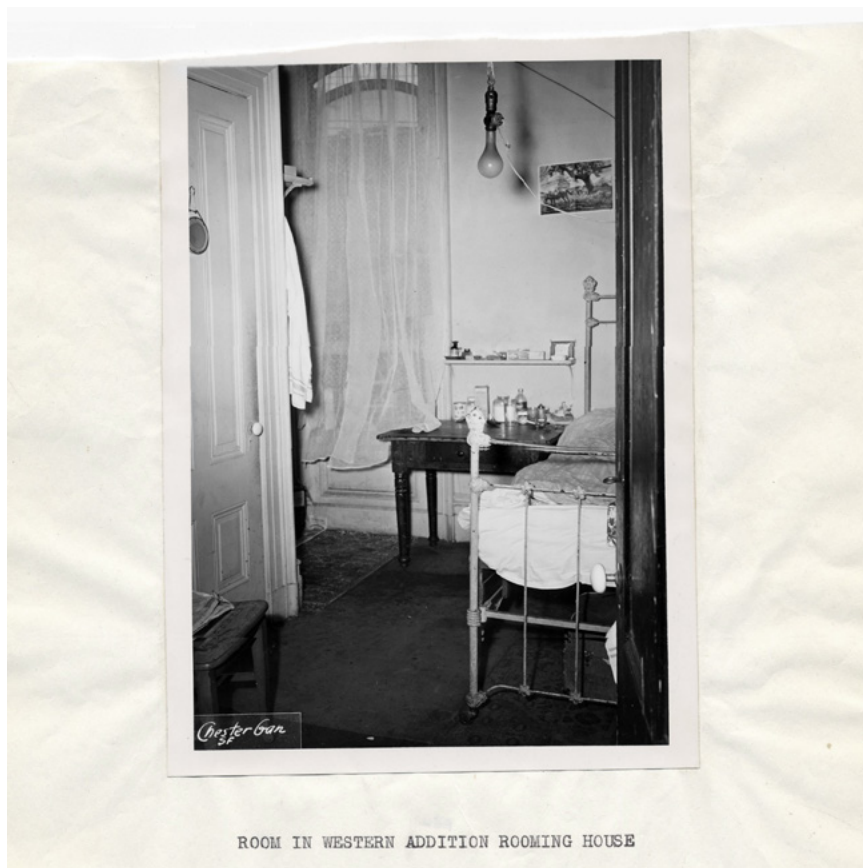


# Bed for One

## A Queer Interpretation of the Rooming House

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Interior of a late 1940s single room dwelling in San Francisco, located on the corner of Oak and Laguna Streets. Photograph by Chester Gan, 1947. San Francisco Historical Photographs Collection in San Francisco Public Library Archive.

Little did we know as children, zealously dancing to the rhythm of the infamous 1980s disco song by the Village People, “Y.M.C.A.,” that the lyrics referred to the residential hotels, built by the Youth Men’s Christian Association throughout the US. The song reflected, in a humorous manner, upon the everyday life of the blue- and white-collar workers who dwelled between their sheets and the streets, coexisting in these diverse, open places, where everyone is ‘welcomed.’ “You can get yourself clean, you can have a good meal, you can do whatever you feel.”<sup>01</sup> The song quickly became a touchstone for queer culture, as some of these residential hotels, known as the Ys, were popular cruising spots. On the other hand, scholars narrate a different story about the democratic nature of the YMCA residential hotels, focusing on the institution’s ‘violent past,’ such as moral reform and social control over their occupants, in order to suppress, “crimes against nature.”<sup>02</sup>

01 Village People, “Y.M.C.A.,” track number one in *Cruisin’* (Casablanca, 1978).

02 Allan Berube, “Resorts for Gay Perverts: A History of Gay Bathhouses” in *My Desire for History: Essays in Gay, Community, and Labor History*, ed. John D’Emilio; Estelle B. Freedman (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 68.

Within following twentieth century industrialization and urbanization processes, single people, both literally and metaphorically, did not yet have a home away from home into this newly formed world.<sup>03</sup> Even today, these ‘lonely’ figures still raise questions, not only about their single status, displacement and frequent economic migration, but also, and more importantly, about the types of habitation that could accommodate such “non-family elements,”<sup>04</sup> who ‘belong nowhere and to none.’ Spanning from the late nineteenth century until the mid-twentieth century, the following notes revisit, through a political, *queer perspective*, the rooming house, as a speculative building type, where the “architectural and programmatic ‘façade of domestic normalcy,’”<sup>05</sup> apparent in its counterparts, has completely dissolved, encouraging the agency of *queer subjectivity* to emerge.

#### THE SINGLE ‘MAN’: FROM LODGER TO ROOMER

By the mid-1800s, the expansion of capitalism and introduction of wage labor disrupted the household production system as a self-sufficient whole. For the first time in history, sex didn’t revolve around procreation, and individuals, freed from traditional family and kinship ties, could pursue a life, and thus a personal identity, of their own, far from home.<sup>06</sup> The working class and the ‘liberated’ single people, however, were previously unprecedented categories. Before the establishment of boardinghouses in the late nineteenth century, the sleeping arrangements of this new category were either, lodging in overcrowded rental barracks or in family houses – often assisting the family, working as apprentices or farmers in both urban and rural contexts.<sup>07</sup> But around the turn of the twentieth century, their decline and social marginalization was evident.<sup>08</sup> This waning was caused by various reasons, depending on whether the boardinghouse was institutionalized, or family owned. The boardinghouse became marked by attempts to reform its occupants within the confinement of its “redemptive spaces”<sup>09</sup> in the first case or considered to be “a recipe for marital disaster”<sup>10</sup> in the latter. The close proximity between lodgers and family members, who shared domestic functions in the case of family-owned boardinghouses, was seen as a threat for the institution of marriage, both from the outside of the family as well as from within.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, the rooming house followed, paradoxically providing a different solution for the ‘unmarried problem’ which otherwise persisted to cause discomfort in a ‘modern age society.’ Amid such profound transformations concerning the structure and ideology of the nuclear family, this type of residential hotel offered cheap one-room accommodation and a sense of privacy which was favored, despite being deprived of any amenities, services, domestic functions or common spaces. Comprised solely of standardized bedrooms, the rooming house, as a symbolic and architectural type, proved to be a protagonist in the struggle to explore intimacy and individual life, gender equality, family values, bonds and alternative forms of kinships.

03 Erin Echold Sassin, *Single People and Mass Housing in Germany, 1850-1930* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023), 2.

04 Ibid., 3.

05 Ibid., 217.

06 John D’Emilio, *Capitalism and Gay Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 468-470.

07 Sassin, *Single People and Mass Housing in Germany, 1850-1930*, 2-4.

08 Paul Groth, *Living Downtown: The History of Residential Hotels in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 93.

09 Sassin, *Single People and Mass Housing in Germany, 1850-1930*, 8.

10 Ibid., 2.

11 Ibid., 4.



The cover of the song “Home Sweet Home,” illustrating the ideal model of the American middle-class family. Drawn by unknown artist, 1866, Smithsonian Institution. From Howard P. Chudacoff, *The Age of the Bachelor: Creating an American Subculture* (New Jersey, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 30.

During modernity, the term, single person, previously meaning ‘a man,’ by default, became a non-binary phrase, which now included working women who sought independence. Following the migration of the working class to larger cities, in both the U.S and in Europe, the number of people living alone in single room occupancies doubled between 1930 and 1957 according to the BBC documentary, *Loneliness*. Significantly, this same broadcast made use of the word homosexuality, the first time that this word was mentioned by any national radio station.<sup>12</sup> Stigmatized and slandered in tabloids for their “grim” rooms and their lives of, “squalor,”<sup>13</sup> homosexuals were presented as deviant, accused of taking advantage of this radical invention, the rooming house, to be “disguised, of course, as single men.”<sup>14</sup> As rooming houses grew into a widespread phenomenon, especially in the United States, they became opposed and criticized by conservative, middle class and often religious reformers who believed that single room occupancies undermined the ideals of the nuclear family, traditional domestic settings, and the stability of society. While the origins of the rooming house can be traced back to the overlapping realms of San Francisco’s cultural, sociopolitical, and architectural history,<sup>15</sup> one can also find similar types in other parts of the world, especially in the United Kingdom.<sup>16</sup> The relationship between the rooming house, the form of life it produced and *queer subjectivity*, may indicate a contradictory, by nature, category; *queer domesticity*. So, what role did this type of habitation

12 Groth. *Living Downtown: The History of Residential Hotels in the United States*, 109.

13 Ibid., 110.

14 Ibid., 109.

15 Ibid., 11.

16 Mark Armstrong, “The Bedsit” in *Queering the Interior*, ed. Andrew Gorman-Murray; Matt Cook (London: Routledge, 2018), 108-116.

play in the formation of the *queer subject*? How does a paradigm of *queer domesticity* contribute to the general discussion on mass housing types for the unmarried men and women? What is the relationship between *queer domesticity* and *queer subjectivity*? Is the model of rooming house an appropriate paradigm to consider for current housing demands? How did public and private interest intersect with the needs of those marginalized, the single people specifically? The dream for *A Room of One's Own*<sup>17</sup> still persists, in many ways. While these notes do not attempt to answer all these questions, the interpretation of this case study, from a *queer perspective*, may indeed broaden the knowledge and, thus, the understanding of domestic space and the production of subjectivity, as mutually constructed categories.



Interior photograph of an early twentieth century boardinghouse in Chicago, occupied by a Lithuanian, immigrant worker. The walls of his bedroom are decorated with religious symbols and portraits. Ca. 1920s, Chicago History Museum. From Howard P. Chudacoff, *The Age of the Bachelor: Creating an American Subculture* (New Jersey, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 86.

### QUEER PERSPECTIVE: ON SUBJECTIVITY AND DOMESTICITY

Firstly, in order to elaborate on the concept of *queer perspective*, it is perhaps crucial to unpack the ways the term *queer* was appropriated by architecture theorists in the past. Towards the end of the 1990s, in the wake of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, these theorists considered the role architecture played in the construction of social identities. Together their work gave visibility to case studies otherwise relegated by canonical readings of architecture. In doing so, these theorists introduced “queer architecture,” by suggesting, “queer ways,”<sup>18</sup> of appropriating space as ‘liberating’ and ‘expressive’ practices. A paradoxical argument emerges in most queer architectural theories. On the one hand this argument proposes the queer

<sup>17</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Harlow, England: Penguin Books, 2014).

<sup>18</sup> Olivia Laing, “Foreword” in *Queer Spaces: An Atlas of LGBTQ+ Places and Stories*, ed. Adam Nathaniel Furman; Joshua Mardell (London: Riba Publishing, 2022), 8-9.

body as architecture in and of itself, while also simultaneously citing the queer body as the basis for architectural production. ‘Queer spaces,’ as they are they are often called, are imagined to be “not built,” but instead, “only implied, and usually invisible,” experienced by the subject with the intention to define a sexual sense of self or to host sexual acts.<sup>19</sup> Oversexualized, celebrated, romanticized and viewed as theatrical, “open leaky, self-critical or ironic, and ephemeral,”<sup>20</sup> the *queer subject* was theorized as lacking any connection to traditional, domestic life, and thus they ‘belonged to the streets.’ But domesticity, regulated by conventional architectural thinking as a monolithic concept, is also problematic and far from a “neutral” terrain, as presented; in comparison with the ‘unpleasantness’ of the outside world. Deriving from the Greek word *demo*, syn. “to build,” the term, “gave rise to words denoting potentially violent control, first and foremost dominus, ‘the head of the house,’ and its various declensions: domination, dominion.”<sup>21</sup> Although typological logic has been useful to reveal the oppressive and predatory character of the ‘home,’ as an entity defined by gender roles and a rigid separation between private and public spaces, however, it is also possible to argue that, only from a political, *queer perspective*, we might be able to see beyond such prevailing heteronormative compasses, generalizations, speculative readings, social biases, and gender, or other, stereotypes.<sup>22</sup> If the long history of housing contributed towards the naturalization of heteronormativity, then revisiting and recomposing the, often fragmented, historical narratives from a non-binary and non-normative perspective, in the context of *architectural microhistories*,<sup>23</sup> can set the ground for the demystification of this ideological tendency, supported by scholars in the past.

Henri Lefebvre once noted that, “space commands bodies... it is produced with this purpose in mind; this is its *raison d’être*.”<sup>24</sup> “Produced with this purpose in mind” or not, the idea of identity is rather complex, and yet, the interiority of domestic space, in conjunction with typology and a *queer perspective* can reveal how identities take shape, and, particularly, to the sociopolitical processes that constitute individuals as subjects. *Queer subjectivity*, within this context, is understood as a resisting force, confronted with social constraints and existing heteronormative patterns. As David Halperin explains, “‘queer’ does not name some natural kind or refer to some determinate object; it acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm. *Queer* is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers.”<sup>25</sup> The subject can be identified, beyond gender and sexuality, within these ‘vague’ and ‘open’ terms, as one that struggles for a private life, alternative forms of being and a sense of belonging. While these attributes can be used for associating these, ‘deviant,’ marginalized individuals, from different social groups, within the queer spectrum, the focus will shift to the unmarried, working, men and women, affiliated with homosexuality.

The *queer subject*<sup>26</sup> first gained public attention following the 1895 London imprisonment of Oscar Wilde, the infamous writer and leader

19 Aaron Betsky, *Queer Space* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1997), 18.

20 Ibid., 18.

21 Pier Vittorio Aureli; Maria S. Giudici, “Familiar Horror: Toward a Critique of Domestic Space,” *Log*, no. 38, (Fall, 2016): 113.

22 Jose Parra-Martínez; María-Elia Gutiérrez-Mozo; Ava Covandonca Gilsanz-Díaz, “Queering California Modernism: Architectural Figurations and Media Exposure of Gay Domesticity in the Roosevelt Era,” *Architectural Histories*, vol. 8, issue 1 (2020): 15.

23 For an illustration of what is *microhistory* see: Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms; The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John and Anne C. Tedeschi (John Hopkins University Press, 1980).

24 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, England: Blackwell, 1991), 143.

25 David Halperin, *Saint Foucault* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 63.

26 The early use of the term *queer*, as analyzed by the *Oxford Dictionary of Word Origins*, was associated with “strange and eccentric,” and used to describe someone as being “of questionable character and dubious.” It was also used to describe those who lived in poverty by placing them, metaphorically speaking, in an imaginary and unfortunate place, *Queer Street*. In the late eighteenth century, to be *queer* meant to be “unwell.” By the end of the nineteenth century, another definition appeared, aligned with some of the popular explanations addressed by modern discourse. The term was affiliated back then with homosexuality but used in a negative way. Read more in Julia Cresswell, *The Oxford Dictionary of Word Origins*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2009), 351.

of the aesthetic movement, who was put on trial for indecency.<sup>27</sup> As the emergence of wage labor, partially, liberated individuals from familial dependence, homosexuality came to be understood as an identity of personal choice, rather than behavioral condition.<sup>28</sup> That is when a “new homosexual hedonism”<sup>29</sup> arose, according to Hugh David, that extended into domestic space for those privileged enough to afford their right to privacy. Twentieth century U.S state records, are informative on the barbarism that took place in low-income households, related to a national obsession with publicly outing homosexuals.<sup>30</sup> This condition intensified as queer individuals dove into sex-segregated situations<sup>31</sup> such as the army or, in this case, affordable single room dwellings, such as rooming houses. Intended for the working class as a response to a housing crisis, this type of residential hotel seems to be one of the first paradigms of *queer domesticity*. It went against the contemporary traditional middle-class ideals, suburban homemaking practices and societal pressures, all of which were otherwise related to the reproduction of the heteronormative family. As such, single room occupancy can be interpreted as embodying an unorthodox form of life. So, what is *queer domesticity*? One way of looking at *queer domesticity* is that it includes the ambitions, the struggles, the constraints or in other words the human conditions, that mark the existence of the *queer subject*. Another way of looking at *queer domesticity*, is that it does not necessarily represent the opposite of other forms of conventional domesticity, nor related solely with the *queer subject*, as is the case of the rooming house. On the contrary, there are several examples throughout history that have shown otherwise, but can be only interpreted as such, when *queer use*<sup>32</sup> of domestic space takes place.

#### FROM SINGLE BED TO SINGLE ROOM OCCUPANCY

Interestingly, the single room type was not an invention of modernity, but existed, exceptionally, in antiquity, appearing in settlements such as in Delos, emerging between the sixth and the eighth centuries, under similar housing and labour demands. Contemporary historians such as Lisa Nevett suggest that these were habituated by the lower working class, by merchants, traders or even individuals who worked and lived in the same place.<sup>33</sup> In the case of the latter, the single room dwelling would be described as a *taberna*. In the architecture discourse the ‘fascination’ surrounding this form of habitation resurfaced with Karel Teige’s book, *The Minimum Dwelling*,<sup>34</sup> published in the 1930s. His response to the *Housing Question*, for the lower-working class following World War I, consists of a radical cohabitation model where the inhabitants could claim their own individual, private room: the “live-in cell,”<sup>35</sup> separated from all the other domestic functions which he saw being used collectively. The bedroom, as a space for withdrawal, was seen by Teige not only as a way to liberate the individual from any form of labor, but, also as a right, beyond privilege.

27 Hugh David, *On Queer Street: A Social History of British Homosexuality, 1895-1995* (London : HarperCollins, 1997), 14-26.

28 John D’Emilio. *Capitalism and Gay Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 470.

29 David, *On Queer Street: A Social History of British Homosexuality, 1895-1995*, 77.

30 Allan Berube, *My Desire for History: Essays in Gay, Community, and Labor History*, 68-69.

31 John D’Emilio. *Capitalism and Gay Identity*, 472.

32 The interpretation of *queer domesticity* is aligned George Chancey’s theory on ‘queer space’ in George Chauncey, “Privacy Could Only Be Had in Public: Gay Uses of the Streets,” in *Stud: Architectures of Masculinity*, ed. Joel Sanders (New York: Princeton Architectural Press), 224–260.

33 Lisa C. Nevett, “House-Form and Social Complexity: The Transformation of Early Iron Age Greece”, in *Domestic Space in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 22-42.

34 Karel Teige. *The Minimum Dwelling*, trans. Eric Dluhosch (The MIT Press, 2002), 13.

35 *Ibid.*, 13.

The quest for individuality took various forms in the history of the bedroom. Before germ theory was acknowledged, and the dominant fear of the miasma theory challenged, doctors in the 1800s advocated, not only for separate bedrooms, between children and parents, but, also, against bed sharing. Along with the domestic sanitarians of the time, they helped popularize the use of the twin bed system in upper-class and middle-class households. This shift towards single size beds, particularly in martial bedrooms, questioned the dynamics of heteronormative relationships in their most intimate context. Diverging from the ideologies of Victorian marriage, the twin bed system went from being advocated for its hygienic advantages, such as offering better bed rest and purer air for each party, to becoming a desired-fashionable object, providing privacy and a sense of individuality in a co-sleeping setting.<sup>36</sup> Demonized by social reformers as a modern “anti-home” enemy,<sup>37</sup> the single bed, never-the-less, quickly became the apparatus through which the space of the bedroom was shaped and standardized in modern architecture.<sup>38</sup> As an object it charted the pathway, from the top-down, for this room to become a, general, functional and cultural ‘tradition.’ But in western societies, until the nineteenth century, especially in lower class households, the bed was shared and the place of rest had rarely ever been a, functionally, individualized space nor ‘private’ within the boundaries of its four walls. It was communal, multi-generational and multifunctional.<sup>39</sup>



Heal & Son's bedroom arrangement in the British Pavillion at the Paris Exhibition.  
Heal and Son's, *Painted Bedroom*, 1925, Victoria and Albert Museum. From Hillary Hinds, “Together and Apart: Twin Beds, Domestic Hygiene and Modern Marriage, 1890-1945,” *Journal of Design History*, vol. 23, no. 3 (2010): 298.

36 Hillary Hinds, “Together and Apart: Twin Beds, Domestic Hygiene and Modern Marriage, 1890-1945,” *Journal of Design History*, vol. 23, no. 3 (2010): 275–304.

37 *Ibid.*, 277.

38 *Ibid.*, 286.

39 The history of the bedroom is traced in Michelle Perrot, *The Bedroom: An Intimate History*, trans. Lauren Elkin (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).



In literature, the bedroom, a place rarely exposed until then, emerged as the center of attention for Anglo-American writers such as Virginia Woolf who advocated for *A Room of One's Own*,<sup>40</sup> as a necessity for nurturing creativity and establishing intellectual freedom. Yet decades later, Paul Groth referring to the case of single room occupancy in San Francisco, described it as a form of, “economic and residential limbo,”<sup>41</sup> where discrimination dominated every level of an individual’s quest for independence, especially for minorities. To the queer community, especially for those in the lower class, however, the single room dwelling was one of the few options available.<sup>42</sup> The rooming house provided an alternative path for those seeking not only individuality, but, also employment and a sense of respectability. “Nominally appearing to be single, homosexual couples of men or women could also live together in rooming houses. They apparently provoked little suspicion or approbation, as adult pairs of men or women commonly lived together to share expenses. Some rooming house districts were known to be areas that gay men or lesbians lived in and frequented.”<sup>43</sup> Rooming houses are described by scholars such as Groth, as “invisible homes,”<sup>44</sup> not only because the ground floors were occupied with signs, shops, cafes, bars and diners, masquerading the entrances leading to the upper floors and commercial hotel rooms, but also because they were mostly occupied by those living at the margin of society.<sup>45</sup> Nurtured by the real estate industry and companies desiring cheap labor, single room dwellings were a home for these ‘invisible’ hotel dwellers, not only temporarily, but in many cases, indefinitely.



An exterior view of the National Hotel in San Francisco, built in 1906. Image from Yelp.

40 Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*.

41 Groth, *Living Downtown: The History of Residential Hotels in the United States*, 103.

42 Ibid., 23.

43 Ibid., 107.

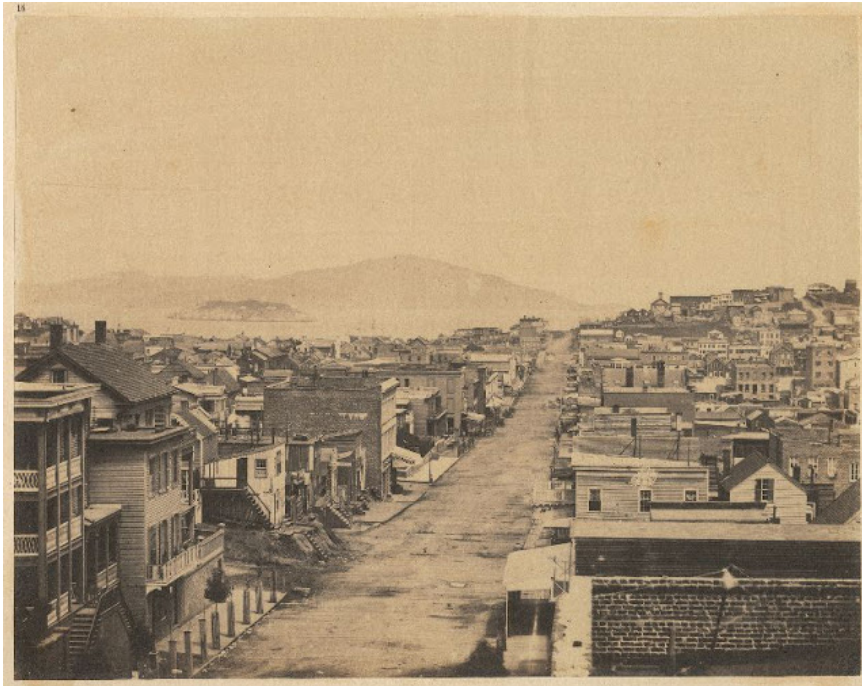
44 Paul Groth, “‘Marketplace’ Vernacular Design: The Case of Downtown Rooming Houses,” *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*, vol. 2 (1986): 179.

45 Ibid., 179.



### THE EMERGENCE OF THE ROOMING HOUSE

Oscar Wilde once claimed that “anyone who disappears is said to be seen in San Francisco. It must be a delightful city and possesses all the attractions of the next world.”<sup>46</sup> Already by 1848, San Francisco had one of the most important ports in North America and was considered to be the primary hub during the California Gold Rush.<sup>47</sup> Addressing the country’s rapid growth population growths, farming and manufacturing were industrialized during the 1860s. Together these changes coincided with the appearance of boardinghouses, and significantly, with rooming houses that, “reflected a bachelor existence and lodging-house mentality.”<sup>48</sup> Miners, traders and the nomads of the time seeking employment, migrated from both Anglo – and Latin- American areas to the, “city of bachelors,”<sup>49</sup> forging trading relations with the locals. Nan Alamilla Boyd called San Francisco a, “wide-open town” due to its, “early history of lawlessness, boss politics, and administrative graft.”<sup>50</sup> Although the rooming house was likely not invented in San Francisco, the city still provided the conditions needed for the single room occupancy to become a ubiquitous type, such as a dramatic housing shortage coupled with the increase in population. As the years went by, the young men and women lured into this city were not only skilled workers but also, “clerks, salesmen, bookkeepers, shop girls, stenographers, dressmakers, milliners, barbers, restaurant-keepers, black railroad porters and stewards, policemen, nurses, ... journeymen carpenters, painters, machinists, and electricians,”<sup>51</sup> and individuals who only worked seasonally.



Early twentieth century photo of San Francisco.  
 Photograph taken by George R. Fardon, *View Down Stockton Street*, 1855,  
 UC Berkeley, Bancroft Library.

46 Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Ed. James Gifford, Canada: University of Victoria, 2011), 136.

47 Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide-Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley, University of California Press: 2005), 27.

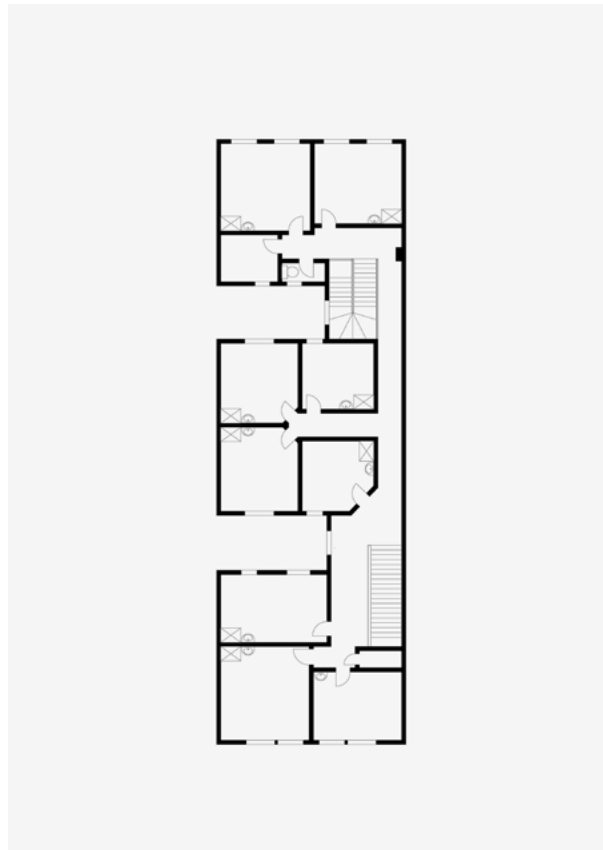
48 *Ibid.*, 27.

49 *Ibid.*, 27.

50 *Ibid.*, 4.

51 Albert Benedict Wolfe quoted in Paul Groth. *Living Downtown: The History of Residential Hotels in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 103.

In the United States, single living emerged with the rise of the commercial hotel; a definition applied to any establishment or house that was capable of renting six or more guest rooms. The title of a residential hotel unit is attributed to any single room dwelling where the duration of stay exceeds one month, and therefore the occupant is, “legally considered permanent resident of the city.”<sup>52</sup> Until the 1960s, there were four dominant types of residential hotels: palace hotels, mid-priced hotels, rooming houses, and cheap boardinghouses. Residential hotels were in fact categorized according to the social status of their occupants.<sup>53</sup> Rooming houses were referred to as the “plain hotels for plain people.”<sup>54</sup> This type evolved from 20 to 40 years old boardinghouses, owned and managed by middle-income families. Most of the previous boardinghouses were row houses, had multiple stories and, generally, had varied room sizes. The non-existent dining service meant fewer staff, and that more rooms were available to be transformed into bedrooms. The former boardinghouses usually had approximately sixteen or more rooms, including the owner’s kitchen, a bathroom and the laundrette. In many cases, there was not sufficient lighting, insulation, or ventilation and only a small number of rooms had central heating or individual stoves. The rooms situated on the upper floors, the unheated attic or those at the end of a hallway were the cheapest rooms to rent. Additionally, the furniture was limited and numbered. For example, in contrast to mid-priced hotels, rooming houses typically provided, at most, a sink, a bowl and a pot. They only had one bathroom, usually the one that was originally constructed, and the number of baths a resident could take, in many cases, was limited to “one hot bath per week.”<sup>55</sup>



Redrawing of San Francisco’s Delta Hotel plan view.

Original drawing from Paul Groth, *Living Downtown: The History of Residential Hotels in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 98.

<sup>52</sup> Groth, *Living Downtown: The History of Residential Hotels in the United States*, 6.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-23.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>55</sup> Groth, *Living Downtown: The History of Residential Hotels in the United States*, 94.

By 1910, commercial rooming houses were run with the use of official permits.<sup>56</sup> Permits formalized a rooming house model in the U.S legal system in such a way that incentivized their deliberate production in greater number but, simultaneously, with the establishment of regulations, the possibility for conversions was limited. This resulted in the rapid construction of purposely built rooming houses, as ambitious owners believed “that single-room living would bring in reliable rents for a long time,”<sup>57</sup> making them economically viable. This aspiration solved a lot of issues concerning lighting and ventilation, however higher ceilings, elevators and common spaces such as lobbies and dining rooms were only incorporated decades later in order to increase rental value. Yet, bathrooms, usually found at the end of the corridor, remained limited. The *National Hotel*, which was built in 1906, characterized the dominant type of that era.<sup>58</sup> This large, rectangular, residential hotel, was comprised of around 50, square, single-room dwellings, with two bathrooms and one toilet on each floor. The ratio was one bathroom per twenty-five rooms. Each room had a ceramic sink, a mirror, a closet, a chest of drawers, and a bed. The sinks in the rooms were mounted lower than usual, to informally function as urinals for the male inhabitants.<sup>59</sup> The insufficient small windows overlooking air shafts were forbidden in subsequent housing regulations. Common spaces were reduced and limited to the narrow corridor and small lobby in front of the manager’s office. More prominently, for Groth, the rooming houses of this era, “represent an urban variation of vernacular design processes,”<sup>60</sup> due to the synergy between the landowner, the architect and the real estate agent involved—who functioned as a mediator between the housing market and the residents. Although the layout remained the same, adjustments to the interior details, lighting, furniture, facades or entrances were made by demand, responding to the long term inhabitants’ needs and desires.



Interior view of the National Hotel.

Photograph taken by the author Paul Groth for his book *Living Downtown: The History of Residential Hotels in the United States* (University of California Press, 1994), 100.

56 Ibid., 92.

57 Ibid., 97.

58 Ibid., 99.

59 Ibid., 100.

60 Groth, “‘Marketplace’ Vernacular Design: The Case of Downtown Rooming Houses,” 188.

Will Kortum's letters from 1906 shed light on the conditions of the newly built rooming house where he moved in after leaving California. The eighteen-year-old wrote to his parents: "the hotel is a new one. Everything is neat and clean, although not large. My room is very light, has hot and cold water, double bed, bureau, washstand, chair, and small table. It also has a closet for clothes." His father was not convinced of the choice. The young clerk reassured him saying: "rest assured that my present place of lodging is no low-class hotel, not a cheap lodging house, but a clean, plastered room, and that the bed is also clean and comfortable."<sup>61</sup> He later left the migrant workers' district and found accommodation in a single-family house where he rented a room, but expressed the lack of privacy in comparison to downtown's rooming houses. Rooming houses were considered a popular choice amongst the unmarried, as they provided a respectable amount of privacy compared to other types of residential hotels. It is precisely for these reasons that rooming houses became a fertile territory for the formation of a queer subculture. The author, Lisa Ben, who eventually initiated the first lesbian publication in the US, titled, *Vice-Versa*, moved into a rooming house in Los Angeles while in pursuit of secretarial work during the last years of the Second World War. "I got my own room," she reminisces, "with kitchen privileges, and from there I met some gay girls. They lived on the floor above me, and one day we were all sunbathing on the garage roof, and they got to talking and I got to listening... So when I heard these girls talk, I started talking, and finally they asked me, 'Do you like boys, or do you go out strictly with girls?' And I said, 'If I had my rathers, I'd go out strictly with girls,' and they said, 'Have you always felt this way?' and I said, 'Yes,' and they said, 'Well, then you're like we are' and I said, 'You mean, you're like that?' Then they took me to a girls Softball game... Then we went to the If Club, dancing, and ah! that was where I met lots of girls."<sup>62</sup> Another illustration of queer life in rooming houses is Donald Vining's diaries which span from the 1940s to the 1980s and cover his life in both New York City and Los Angeles. Vining worked as a YMCA clerk and his writings reveal various erotic encounters with guests, including those with soldiers and marines who were on leave from their service.<sup>63</sup> In fact, he confided in his diaries that, although the Second World War was a "tragedy" to his "mind and soul," it was "a memorable experience" to his "physical being,"<sup>64</sup> as the war was an opportunity for those involved to, liberate themselves from their family's constraints and act upon their erotic desires. Diaries and oral histories reveal that queer communities, especially during World War II, were able to build an effective networks based on collective experiences, organizing drag balls, cruising in parks and streets, gathering in public bathhouses and YMCAs and, sustaining literary societies.<sup>65</sup> The newspapers of the time even inform us about how working-class women, one of them passing as a man, would eventually become legally married by establishing a forged document of civil identity.<sup>66</sup> Opposed to Ferdinand Tönnies, who based his theories about *community* (*Gemeinschaft*) and *society* (*Gesellschaft*) on gendered divisions related to public and private life,<sup>67</sup> the queer community contributed to the emergence of new roles that crossed binaries and such divisions. Individuals were able to contradict such dichotomies and develop a sense of self, while coexisting within the wider social context. Despite this, homosexuals were considered, for the better part of the

61 Will Kortum is quoted in Paul Groth, "'Marketplace' Vernacular Design: The Case of Downtown Rooming Houses", *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*, vol. 2 (1986): 189-190.

62 Berube, *My Desire for History: Essays in Gay, Community, and Labor History*, 87.

63 John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983), 27.

64 Donald Vining is quoted in John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983), 26.

65 *Ibid.*, 12.

66 Berube, *My Desire for History: Essays in Gay, Community, and Labor History*, 41.

67 Sassin, *Single People and Mass Housing in Germany, 1850-1930*, 9-10.



Early twentieth century photo of a drag ball in New York.  
C.a 1920. Photo from Public Domain.

century, as ‘sexual perverts,’ condemned by the law, church and science. In 1953, President Eisenhower even banned their employment from any public service with policies that lasted almost three decades. Their organized meeting places were monitored by the FBI, their mail traced by the Post Office and their homes were surveilled by vice squads, searching for evidence of homosexuality. Seen as a threat for national security, 5,000-10,000 individuals were fired or forced to resign,<sup>68</sup> while thousands of others could not pursue their dreams under the “Lavender Scare.”<sup>69</sup> These witch hunts set the goal to entrap these social “anomalies” not only in public but also in private.<sup>70</sup> George Chauncey, referring to two separate studies, conducted in 1938 and 1940, about the outlaws who were imprisoned in New York, points out that: “Sixty-one percent of the men investigated in 1940 lived in rooming houses, three-quarters of them alone and another quarter with a lover or other roommates; only a third lived in tenement houses with their own families or boarded with others.”<sup>71</sup> As rooming houses and their number of residents multiplied rapidly, religious and philanthropic organizations became strongly opposed to such unconventional domestic settings and worked hard to bring back boardinghouses. Their establishments were not always inclusive, but often sponsored “according to ethnicity, race, or religion.”<sup>72</sup>

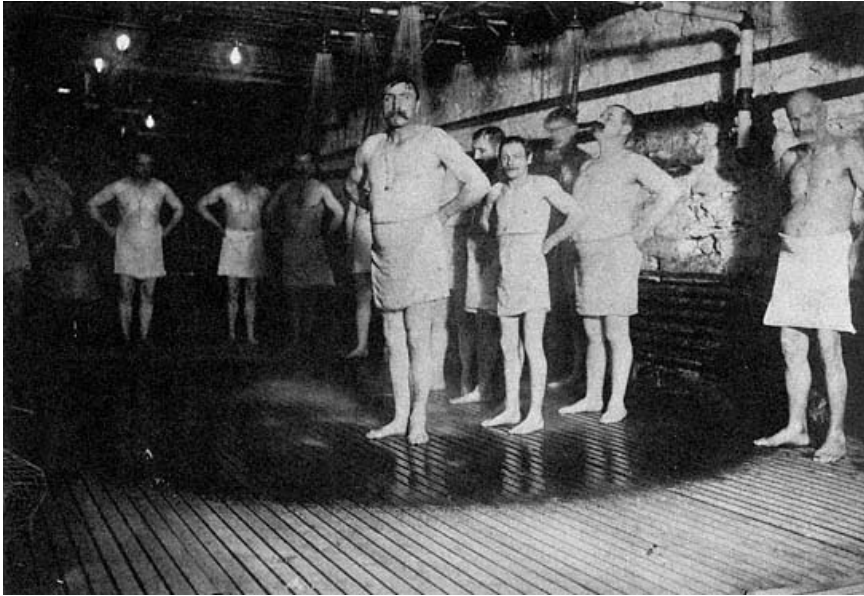
68 Kay M. Lim; Julie Kracov, “The Lavender Scare: How the Federal Government Purged Gay Employees,” *Sunday Morning* (2019), [https://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-lavender-scare-how-the-federal-government-purged-gay-employees/?fbclid=IwAR3fC\\_esnSDvXkPW9XUNML5KB8ypM-FZj0ieKFdVYJaaUDZFGu3BfSVwmVUw](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-lavender-scare-how-the-federal-government-purged-gay-employees/?fbclid=IwAR3fC_esnSDvXkPW9XUNML5KB8ypM-FZj0ieKFdVYJaaUDZFGu3BfSVwmVUw)

69 A term used by David K. Johnson to describe the moral panic which led to the prosecution of homosexuals and to their dismissal from public service during the twentieth century in the U.S. More information concerning this series of events can be found in David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (The University of Chicago Press, 2006).

70 Berube, *My Desire for History: Essays in Gay, Community, and Labor History*, 111.

71 George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender Urban Culture and the Makings of the Gay Male World 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 152.

72 Groth, *Living Downtown: The History of Residential Hotels in the United States*, 102.



An example of a 1900s institutionalized boarding house, as promoted by social reformers. Image of Jacob A. Riis Collection, MCNY. From Paul Groth, *Living Downtown: The History of Residential Hotels in the United States* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994), 240.

#### TOWARDS A 'NON-TYPE' DOMESTIC SPACE

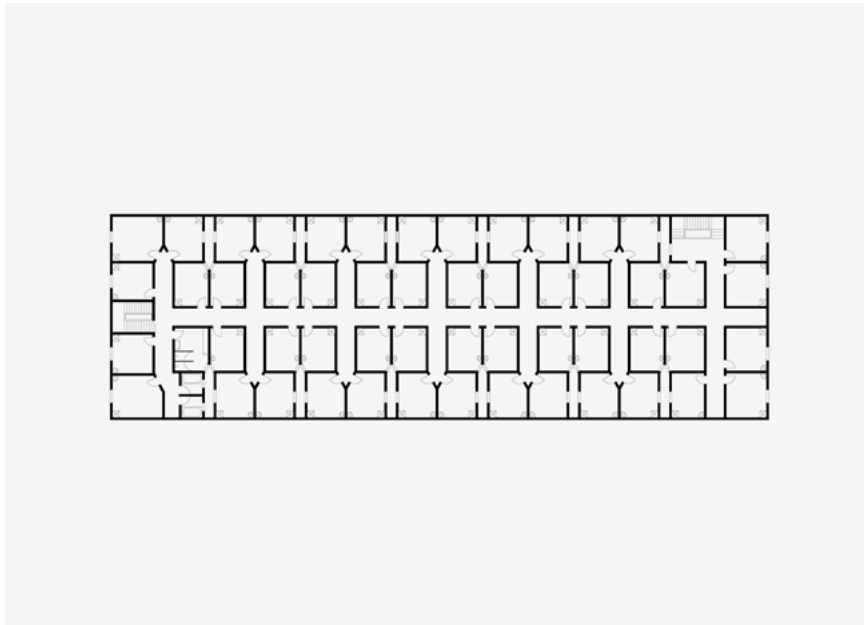
Twentieth century rooming houses marked the beginning of what can be described as *queer domesticity*, a predecessor to solidarity movements and other liberated forms of cohabitation that followed decades later. George Chauncey once claimed that there is no 'queer space,' but "only spaces used by queers or put to *queer use*."<sup>73</sup> This can be further argued by saying that there is no 'queer space,' but, rather only a *queer critique of space*. In other words, a political, *queer perspective*. In stark contrast to the political conditions of the time and attempts for social reform, queer agency emerged, in the city of San Francisco, in parallel with the rooming house. Built out of necessity, its role was instrumental for the society's transformation which is evident by the, 1960s and onwards, revolutionary, feminist, and queer endeavours. The building type, following boarding and lodging, by providing solely a *bed for one*, for the unmarried men and women, encouraged an 'openness' which deviated from the traditional division between the private and public realm, in the context of domestic space. Freed from domestic labour, the *queer subject* was able to discover a sense of self and be part of communities, participate in the city's public life, economically, intellectually, politically, socially, whereas, in the past, their role was limited to being a servant or forced into an unwanted marital union.

A kinship is clearly apparent between *queer subjectivity*, form of life and this type of habitation. Rafael Moneo suggested that, "to raise the question of typology in architecture is to raise a question of the nature of the architectural work itself. To answer it means, for each generation, a redefinition of the essence of architecture..."<sup>74</sup> One could easily claim that the rooming house is a unique example that belongs to the distant past, lacking the precise formal, functional structure rooted in any other domestic typological series. In simpler terms, a bedroom alone is not a home, based on common perceptions and heteronormative ideas of do-

73 George Chauncey, "Privacy Could Only Be Had in Public: Gay Uses of the Streets," in *Stud: Architectures of Masculinity*, ed. Joel Sanders (New York: Princeton Architectural Press), 224–260.

74 Rafael Moneo, "On Typology," *Oppositions*, The MIT Press, issue 13 (1978): 22.

mesticity. One could also claim that rooming houses derive from boardinghouses, thus from any domestic setting transformed to accommodate the needs of such building types. Traditionally, in heteronormative houses, the bedroom is one part of a larger self-sufficient whole that includes all the necessary functions for the reproduction of the nuclear family. Typology is what connects all the parts of a house within specific configurations such as the townhouse or the detached ‘suburban’ house. When a building is subdivided into almost equal bedrooms, it loses its typological identity, becoming more of a paratactic aggregation of rooms that have the same function. For this reason, it may be possible to argue that a rooming house is a ‘non-type,’ domestic, paradigm, shaped according to a singular piece of furniture, the single bed, both as a symbolic and spatial entity. The single room whose form is meant to accommodate the single bed, can be interpreted as a spatial embodiment of *queer subjectivity* that, because of its generic form based on the genderless and classless single bed, escapes any existing, ‘typical’ domestic arrangement.



Redrawing of the National Hotel's floor plan.  
Original drawing from Paul Groth, *Living Downtown: The History of Residential Hotels in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 101.

Beyond Karl Marx's conception of *use*, based on value, Giorgio Agamben proposes an understanding of *use* which refers to the simple act of using something, opposed to any sense of appropriation.<sup>75</sup> Contrary to the stereotypes suggested by queer theorists where everything can be ‘queered’ by everyone through ‘liberating’ social and spatial practices, the idea of *use* is stripped from any ideological burden. Thus, it offers a critical perspective on the relationship between the self and form of life, between body and being, between essence and existence. Opposing the brokenness of possession, the reductive spirit of function and legal authorization, the sense of everyday *use* for Agamben, is the core of being in the world. And it is by considering the notion of *use* that the idea of *queer domesticity* can be realized, and a typological logic may find its way, by focusing on

75 Camillo Boano; Giovanna Astolfo, “A New Use of Architecture: The Political Potential of Agamben's Common Use,” *ARQ*, núm. 91, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile Santiago (2015): 17.



the parallel production of life, type, and subject. Under this lens, *queer domesticity* manifests as an incomplete, in this particular case, yet radical category, where the traditional functions of a house, besides the bedroom, are scattered, existing outside the structure of the rooming house. Everyday life is organized around an almost diagrammatic structure of interior subdivisions, comprised of bedrooms, where mundane, daily, even domestic activities take place outside, in the street, in the presence of the public eye. The laundromat two blocks away, the diner in the end of the street, the park at the corner, the bathhouse three doors down, amongst other familiar and unfamiliar places, appear as an extension of the single room dwelling, and are often mentioned in literature or in oral histories, as the heart of the queer community in those oppressive times. The subject, departing from the microcosmos of a heteronormative domestic setting, is inevitably, therefore, confronted with themselves, the city and with others who chose a similar path in life, seeking refuge in this eccentric form of habitation.

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