

# HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT: THE CONSPICUOUS ABSENCE OF PERSONAL LIFE IN THE MODERNIST NARRATIVE OF DOMESTIC SPACES

Mrinal S. Rammohan  
4,476 Words

The Leighton House, home of Victorian artist Frederic Leighton; 2 Willow Road<sup>1</sup>, home of Hungarian architect Erno Goldfinger and his artist wife Ursula Goldfinger; and The Homewood<sup>2</sup>, home of Welsh-born architect Patrick Gwynne are three domestic spaces in and around London that have been preserved and exhibited as museums. In the home-museum the building itself is the artifact, occupying the threshold between public and private, and pointing to an absence of the personal in domestic spaces. Looking to discuss physical encounters with buildings as the principal mode of research, the objects of investigation in this essay are these three domestic buildings primarily experienced through planned (and at times guided) visits: museum sites owned and run by two different organizations—the National Trust and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. While photographs, drawings, and text all form valuable sources of information and critique, the event-encounter with a building provides us with an immediacy of experience that is missing from other sources. That is not to say that it offers a more authentic narrative, but is another mode of representation of architecture. These museum sites are key spaces of interaction between architecture and historical narrative.

In her seminal book *Privacy and Publicity: Architecture as Mass Media*, Beatriz Colomina proposes that Modern Architecture is not modern because of its purported alignment with the high ideals of functionalism and minimalism but, because of its engagement with mass media. She goes on to say that the relationship is so dense that architecture and mass media are interchangeable and inseparable in the modern era. Taking this argument forward, I would like to suggest that of the various outlets for the dissemination of architecture, the act of visiting a building is also molded and shaped by mass media. The ‘museumification’ of certain architectural sites that turn the building into an artifact are—through the act of curating—constructing a particular narrative of the building. In the process of providing visitors with an accessible comprehension of the site, the possibility of multiple narratives is denied, and a dominant, neatly packaged, and often masculine-oriented narrative for public consumption emerges, resulting in the erasure and absence of the messy, uncomfortable, and private parts of history. This narrative is mapped onto the space, removing whatever does not conform with it and tying it in with Foucault’s argument about museums as Heterotopia, “a place that is outside of time, inaccessible to the wear and tear of the years”<sup>3</sup> where a story is seemingly preserved in its original state for eternity.

Which brings me to the second concern of the essay: the domestic realm. Often associated with the feminine, the domestic realm has always been a problematic area

for Modernist architecture, which has favored a more masculine-oriented viewpoint. While many theorists have argued that Modernism has produced buildings and spaces with predominantly masculine attributes, I would like to argue, in line with Colomina’s claim about architecture emerging as a mass medium at the beginning of the twentieth century, that Modernism changed the way we evaluate space itself. It remained not so much about the spaces themselves but how they were seen to be in the mold of certain universal ideals. The effects of this shift in perspective are also seen in the ‘modern’ conception of older buildings, which is reflected in the discussion of the Leighton House in this paper. The modern narrative of domestic space often glosses over the personal, lived aspect of the domestic simply because it disrupts the established narrative. Disregarding certain problematic areas of lived experience, Modernism fostered a homogenous, universal ideal of living, something that both Adolf Loos<sup>4</sup> and Walter Benjamin<sup>5</sup> allude to in their writings about the interior.

## MODERNITY AND UTOPIA

“We say that a face is handsome when the precision of the modelling and the disposition of the features reveal proportions which we *feel to be harmonious* because they arouse, deep within us and beyond our senses, a resonance, a sort of sounding board which begins to vibrate, an indefinable trace of the Absolute which lies in the depths of our being.”  
— Le Corbusier, *Towards A New Architecture*<sup>6</sup>

The powerful ideal of utopia is a strategy of control, and much like the strategy employed to combat plague in French towns in the seventeenth century as outlined by Foucault<sup>7</sup>, Modernism uses the perfect idealism of utopia as a system of control to deal with the indefinite and subjective nature of the past. Utopia was part of a system of ideals and universally applicable rules that governed modernity. In order to understand any historical event or phenomenon, we must be able to fit it into this tightly controlled framework of order. The reverse held true as well, if it didn’t fit into the framework, it could be discarded.

Such levels of control are also illustrated in the carefully choreographed photographs of 2 Willow Road taken by Erno Goldfinger. These photographs—dating back to 1939, soon after his house was completed—show very deliberate and staged views of the house. Sparsely furnished, the photos seem to have perhaps been taken just after the Goldfingers had moved into their new home. In many of the images, the same pieces of furniture, or the same rug is seen in different places of the

house. In two different views of the drawing room, the chair seems to have been shifted deliberately in one of the shots to align it with the rest of the furnishings visible in the frame. Some of the furniture or furnishings also seem to be deliberately positioned to embellish the frame of the picture. There are no human figures in any of the frames to suggest who or how many people may be living in the house. The home does not seem to be populated by inhabitants but rather the furnishings are inserted only to enhance the photograph of the architectural object. Perhaps the real ‘images’ of domesticity may have interfered with the message Goldfinger wanted to convey about his home.

Just as the photographs are a carefully curated set of images that are designed to convey a utopic vision of the Goldfinger home, the present-day 2 Willow Road is also a meticulously curated space that tells a neatly packaged story about the domestic life of Erno and Ursula Goldfinger. The Home-museum reveals only what it wants to, and hides away that which does not fit into the meta-narrative, transforming a messy, lived-in home into a utopia.

## THE HOME-MUSEUM AS HETEROTOPIC SPACE

“[A] characteristic of heterotopias is that they have, in relation to the rest of space, a function that takes place between two opposite poles. On one hand they perform the task of creating a space of illusion that reveals how all of real space is more illusory, all the locations within which life is fragmented. On the other, they have the function of forming another space, another real space, as perfect, meticulous, and well-arranged as ours is disordered, ill-conceived, and in a sketchy state.”

— Michel Foucault, *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias*<sup>8</sup>

Foucault defines utopias as spaces that “represent society itself brought to perfection”<sup>9</sup>, which are also “fundamentally unreal”<sup>10</sup>. But heterotopias are “effectively realized utopias”<sup>11</sup>—prisons, cemeteries, asylums, museums—that are specially appropriated spaces outside of normative space, that are created to reinforce the normal. Heterotopias therefore, can also be considered as agencies of power and control.

The museum can be seen as an agency of control, in as far as it is a curated space that controls the narrative of history. Foucault formulates the museum as an example of heterotopia because it attempts to “enclose all times, all eras, forms, and styles within a single place ...and yet that is a place outside of time”<sup>12</sup>. The sites



View of the front porte-cochere at The Homewood.  
Photograph by Mrinal S. Rammohan.

being discussed in this paper are slightly different from the traditional museum, in that they do not aim to “accumulate *ad infinitum*”<sup>13</sup>, but have a fixed or narrow scope of collections. Nonetheless, they are still suspended in time and inhabit an idealized version of space and time, outside of the norm. Another way to conceptualize heterotopic spaces is through the notion of the ‘other’. The architectural historian Mary Mcleod points to the explicit omission of “the residence...the more mundane areas of everyday leisure, playgrounds...”<sup>14</sup> in Foucault’s idea of heterotopia. She goes on to say, “he forsakes all the messy, in-between urban spaces that might be considered literally heterotopic”<sup>15</sup> and “seems to exclude the traditional areas of women and children—two groups that most rightly deserve the label of ‘other’”<sup>16</sup>. Therefore, it would be interesting to extend Foucault’s idea of heterotopia to domestic spaces, to see how it disrupts the dominant narrative that these sites have been assigned, and exposes the inherent instabilities within that narrative.

The home-museum therefore is revealed as a dichotomous space. The domestic realm is usually a space that is alive and ever-changing. As Erno Goldfinger once reflected on the aging of a Modernist home: “Certainly the facade should not be altered and that is fundamental but it would be rather peculiar if we were not allowed to alter the inside.”<sup>17</sup> Walter Benjamin’s oft-quoted phrase “to live is to leave traces”<sup>18</sup> also bears testament to that very fact. So what does it mean to create a museum of a home? To capture the home in a single moment is to arrest the dynamism of the domestic space. What is it that is left to be on display? The curated ‘image’ of what that space is meant to be? But what does that image show?

#### THE DOMESTIC: IMAGE AND EXPERIENCE

“But can there be a detective story of the interior itself, of the hidden mechanisms by which space is constructed as interior? Which may be to say, a detective story of detection itself, of the controlling look, the look of control, the controlled look. But where would the traces of the look be imprinted? What do we have to go on? What clues?”

— Beatriz Colomina, *The Split Wall: Domestic Voyeurism*<sup>19</sup>

The museum is a site of public memory. It is where the narrative of history is consolidated and institutionalized. Some museums are purpose-built, a shrine for the historical narrative. But what of those museums that are historical sites in themselves, where the museum is itself a monument? According to Colomina, given the extraordinary interest that modernist architects have shown towards domestic spaces, “the private house” is the monument of the twentieth century. She believes that it is not the actual building that constitutes the monument, but “rather, the house is constructed in a new form of public space: the space of publications, photographs, exhibitions, congresses, fairs, magazines, museums...”<sup>20</sup> which allows it to inhabit “the ephemeral space of the media.”<sup>21</sup> But now, I believe that the translation and transmission of architecture as mass media has been so effective that there is now a reverse process in operation. The image of domesticity, which has been

established in our minds so strongly through mass media, is now being mapped on to the spaces of the Home-museum. The Home-museum, created to provide a coherent narrative of a particular personal life, now becomes the spatial embodiment of the domestic ‘image’. The messy, in-between bits of everyday life are dispensed in favor of the dominant narrative of blissful domesticity. The furniture is rearranged, the bric-à-brac is displayed more prominently, the sheets are put away, and the toilets are scrubbed clean.

The absolute control that we see with the photographs of the houses taken by Goldfinger is reflected in the vision of the curator. The home now must reflect more of the public persona or of what is already publically known about the inhabitants. Some of the inhabitants may even disappear from or be relocated to the less prominent parts of the house. What the museum wants to say may not necessarily align with what the home says. So, the home is altered to fit within the established narrative. In each of the home-museums discussed in this paper, the personal or in some cases person(s) are missing from the grand narrative of the domestic space. The space becomes a reflection of the main character, in these cases, the main male inhabitant of the house. Everything in the house is carefully arranged to reinforce the persona and not the personal.

#### THE PRESENCE OF PERSONA AND THE ABSENT PERSONAL

“Architecture is not simply a platform that accommodates the viewing subject. It is a viewing mechanism that produces the subject. It precedes and frames its occupant.”

— Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Architecture as Mass Media*<sup>22</sup>

All three of the houses chosen for the purposes of this essay are today museums dedicated to strong male figures. The Homewood and 2 Willow Road are self-owned homes of architects, while Leighton house belonged to a Victorian artist. As the guidebook to Leighton house reads, “Leighton House is inextricably linked to the life of its one and only occupant, Frederic Leighton. It was built entirely to his requirements; he was closely involved in its design, construction and decoration...”<sup>23</sup> Similar associations are made between the two other buildings and their primary male occupants. The family forms an auxiliary presence. The Homewood is described very much as a sole vision of the architect Patrick Gwynne, even though it was designed as a family home. At 2 Willow Road, Ursula Goldfinger is represented only through her family money, as the house was seen as a chance to “invest some of Ursula’s capital.”<sup>24</sup> Erno Goldfinger’s large office desk occupies the pride of place in the space called the studio. The studio was originally designed for Ursula, as she was an accomplished artist in her own right. Right from the preliminary sketches of the house, to the final published photographs (which were tightly orchestrated by Erno), Ursula’s studio remained at the heart of the design of the house. Even before they had thought of building this house, Ursula had asked Erno to build a studio for her in Paris, sketches of which look



Ursula Goldfinger's canvasses and easel, kept out of sight at 2 Willow Road.  
Photograph by Mrinal S. Rammohan.

remarkably similar to the studio at 2 Willow Road. When one visits the house today, Ursula's easel is perhaps tucked away in one of the many storage cabinets in the house, nowhere to be seen. The disappearance of Ursula from the studio is explained rather unsatisfactorily as if she "seems never to have had time to make full use of it for her painting."<sup>25</sup>

The house as a space for entertaining is a theme that is played up in the description of all three houses. The walls that fold-up and create a large flowing area on the first floor at 2 Willow Road are well documented, and the tours of the other two houses reveal a similar preoccupation. A visit to The Homewood (a tightly scripted guided tour only) reveals Patrick Gwynne as a "gracious host" who loved to throw parties. The gregarious, cheerful nature of the house as a space for visitors and outsiders is reinforced throughout the literature and the tours of the house. Almost half the tour to The Homewood is also spent in the large drawing room, where we are told about the concealed bar table, integrated mood lighting, the ample dining area, the multi-colored lights on the center-piece of the dining table (the colors which Gwynne would change as the evening progressed), the hot plates, and heated cupboards for the food, so that the 'gracious host' would not have to leave his guest to fetch anything from the kitchen.

The house seems more of a showpiece than a home, which perhaps is what the tour wishes to portray. You do not get access to any of the 'family' space, except a small peak to Gwynne's bedroom. None of the other family spaces are part of the official tour. At the Leighton House too, one is told about how the great Arab Hall was Leighton's grand masterpiece designed to show off his collection of oriental souvenirs. The first floor too plays up a large studio (where he also entertained his guests) and a 'Silk room', which was Leighton's "den" where "he could...receive friends in a more intimate setting than the studio itself"<sup>26</sup>. One must wonder how much of an 'entertainer's' life could they have lived at home. The bedrooms across the board are almost 'ascetic' in comparison to the rest of the houses, showcasing "modesty"<sup>27</sup>, "austerity"<sup>28</sup> and in some cases "commitment to bachelorhood".<sup>29</sup>

Having an austere bedroom is also linked to a virtuous personal life. The discussion of sex is taboo in any of these houses, which seems strange because the domestic space is where most sex would usually take place. Leighton was famously known to turn his guests away after a party, as his house had only the single bedroom, more additions were made to the original house from 1869–1895<sup>30</sup>, but "it is striking how little additional useful accommodation was provided for..." This is somehow linked to the virtuous nature of Leighton who was perhaps 'married to his art', a lone genius. His amorous liaisons with the models that posed for him as stuff of whispers, rumors that have remained unfounded, or at best corroborated only by "circumstantial evidence".<sup>31</sup> But, when the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea decided to have a replica of his bed made to illustrate his bedroom, they chose to make one that is "identical though slightly narrower".<sup>32</sup> Could it be to visually reinforce the idea of it being a bed for one?

On the plans printed in the guidebook, there is a separate model's entrance from the side, into the house.

It is effectively hidden from view from the street, or from anyone else in the more public areas on the ground floor of the house. The stairs from the model's entrance lead directly to the studio on the first floor, the more private area of the house. This access was constructed specifically in the first extension of the house in 1869–1870, explained innocently as an addressal of "the problems of access arrangements for models and a shortage of storage space".<sup>33</sup> The doorway lies locked and inaccessible to the public today, but surely one might imagine a more active usage of the doorway in its heyday. If a narrower bed can suggest a commitment to bachelorhood, a hidden doorway might hint at the opposite. The official party line on this however seems to remain that Lord Leighton did not have sex.

A similar silence is found at The Homewood. Having built the house for his parents, only Patrick Gwynne and his sister returned after military service in World War II. Their parents had passed away in the interim. While Patrick's sister also left soon after her marriage, "for the next 58 years he maintained, refined and thoroughly enjoyed the house."<sup>34</sup> When he began running his office from the house, "the house came alive again...and there were parties...yet for all this entertaining, Gwynne live a disciplined and private life: discriminating, elegant and gentlemanly..."<sup>35</sup> Although Gwynne may have been a private man, an article in *The Guardian* a couple of years after his death makes a brief mention of "His long-term companion, pianist Harry Rand"<sup>36</sup> who lived with him at The Homewood after he returned from the war. Rand apparently occupied the adjoining bedroom to Gwynne's. Yet, there is no trace of him in the house. The picture frames holding photographs of the rest of Gwynne's family in the drawing room are eagerly passed around for a closer look during the tour. The guidebook mentions a "friend" Geoffrey Rand who played the piano captured in one of the photographs. But the house has no trace of a relationship, all the furniture was designed by Gwynne, all the hosting of parties was done by him, the purpose-made desk in the living room is his, the house has obliterated any trace of an 'other'. The tour is as 'clean' as The Homewood's minimalist aesthetic.

The areas of the houses left accessible to the public are the most 'public' areas of the house. The 'servant' spaces of the house are not considered part of the house for the purposes of exhibition. The present caretakers of the properties usually occupy the kitchens and other spaces meant 'literally' for the servants; perhaps rightly so, since they are in reality servicing the houses. But what is key is that none of these spaces form any part of the present narrative of the house. Patrick Gwynne, the gracious host can remain with his guests at all times without having to disappear into the kitchen only because his cook, working in the kitchen just behind the dining area, places the hot food in the heated cupboard through the sliding panels located on the other side of the wall. Similarly, the entire servant's wing located in the basement of Leighton House is never revealed to us when we visit. It is as if these people lived only 'public' lives in these private spaces. The everyday, mundane, messy activities are conveniently discarded in the contemporary narrative of the building.

One must admit that it is not the aim of any of these museums to showcase domesticity. They are there to celebrate an individual, and in that endeavor the narrative they put forth is inevitably skewed. But we should also realize that these imaginations are not absolute truths. Neat parallels cannot be drawn between the messiness and ordinariness of everyday domestic life and the high idealism of the ‘genius’ persona. This particular conception of the flawless genius is in itself flawed. No one can present a coherent and complete narrative of the domestic lives of any person, and the attempt to do so itself creates a contradiction. Colomina shows us through the photographs of Loos and Le Corbusier, the perfect visions that they wanted their houses to portray. In the process, they hid and removed from their pictures a lot of what would actually have gone on in those spaces. The concept of heterotopic spaces works on two levels here. One is the ideal of the museum, attempting to capture the perfection of a life, but in the process becoming a space outside of reality. The second is the extension of Foucault’s concept, into the actual place of the ‘other’, the messy, in-between of domestic space that the carefully curated narratives of the home-museum cannot capture. So as we visit these buildings today, we must try and look at them not as the ‘real’ thing, transparent, and pure, but as another contested representation of space.

- 1 2 Willow Road was the home of Erno and Ursula Goldfinger built by Erno and Ursula in 1939 in Hampstead, London. It is considered a prime example of the Modernist Architecture in Britain. The National Trust now operates the house as a museum.
- 2 The Homewood was the family home of Welsh-born architect Patrick Gwynne which he built himself in 1938. The house is built in the high-modernist style, inspired by Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye. The house is not run by the National Trust as a museum.
- 3 Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias,” in *Architecture Culture 1943–1968*, ed. Joan Ockman, with the collaboration of Edward Eigen (New York: Rizzoli, 1993), 424.
- 4 Adolf Loos, “The Poor Little Rich Man,” in *Adolf Loos 1870–1933: Architect, Cultural Critic, Dandy*, ed. August Sarnitz (Cologne: Taschen, 2003), 18–21.
- 5 Walter Benjamin, “Paris: the Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 146–62.
- 6 Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, trans. Frederick Etchells (London: Architectural Press, 1948), 187.
- 7 Michel Foucault, ““Panopticism” from *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*.” *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts* 2, no. 1 (Autumn 2008): 1–12.
- 8 Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 425.
- 9 Ibid., 423.
- 10 Ibid.

- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid., 425.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Mary McLeod, “‘Other’ Spaces and ‘Others,’” in *The Sex of Architecture*, eds. Diana Agrest, Patricia Conway and Leslie Weisman (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), 19.
- 15 Ibid., 20
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 “Historic pioneers: Architects and clients,” *The Architects’ Journal* 11 (March 1970): 597.
- 18 Benjamin, “Paris the Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” 155.
- 19 Beatriz Colomina, “The Split Wall: Domestic Voyeurism” in *Sexuality and Space*, ed. Beatriz Colomina (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), 74.
- 20 Beatriz Colomina, “The private site of public memory,” *The Journal of Architecture* 4 (Winter 1999): 337, doi: 10.1080/136023699373747.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 250.
- 23 Daniel Robbins, *Leighton House Museum* (London: Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, 2011), 13.
- 24 Alan Powers, *2-Willow Road, Hampstead* (London: National Trust, 1996), 14.
- 25 Ibid., 27.
- 26 Robbins, *Leighton House Museum*, 60.
- 27 Ibid., 66.
- 28 Powers, *2 Willow Road Hampstead*, 30.
- 29 National Trust Volunteer, “Guided Tour of The Homewood,” 13<sup>th</sup> April 2013.
- 30 The first phase of construction took place between 1865–7, followed by the First Extension in 1869–70, The Arab Hall Extension in 1877–81, The Winter Studio construction in 1889–90, and the addition of The Silk Room in 1894–5.
- 31 Robbins, *Leighton House Museum*, 13.
- 32 Ibid., 67.
- 33 Ibid., 21.
- 34 Neil R. Bingham, *The Homewood: Surrey* (London: National Trust, 2004), 11.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Caroline Roux, “Modernist Manners,” *The Guardian*, Aug 6, 2005, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2005/aug/06/architecture>.

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