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QUEER DESIGN RESEARCH IN ARCHITECTURE: A CROSS-CULTURAL METHOD FROM THE PHILIPPINES TO AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

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QUEER DESIGN RESEARCH IN ARCHITECTURE: A CROSS-CULTURAL METHOD FROM THE PHILIPPINES TO AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

ABSTRACT

This article examines how queer theory can inform architectural design research through Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of the closet. The research investigates how relationships between concealment, visibility, safety, identity and belonging can become architectural questions. A research-through-design process combined theoretical investigation, community interviews and questionnaires, contextual research, and iterative architectural experimentation across Manila, Philippines and Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand. Conceptual models explored the spatial implications of the closet before informing two site-specific proposals. The Manila project investigates adaptive reuse and collective living through different degrees of visibility. The Wellington proposal explores a queer social and cultural venue organised around changing relationships between private experience, social interaction and public participation. Their comparison shows how a shared conceptual framework can generate different architectural responses when developed through situated cultural and community knowledge. We argue that the closet can operate as a productive design framework for investigating relationships between visibility, concealment, safety and self-expression. The research demonstrates how queer theory, community knowledge and design experimentation can generate situated architectural knowledge while remaining responsive to diverse experiences of identity and inhabitation.

INTRODUCTION

Architecture participates in the ways societies organise gender, sexuality, identity and social relationships. Spatial distinctions between public and private, visible and concealed and accessible and restricted can shape how people are recognised, how belonging is negotiated, and how everyday environments are experienced. Architectural scholarship has examined these relationships through feminist, queer and critical approaches, drawing attention to the social and political conditions embedded in the built environment.[1]

This article develops research originally undertaken in Josh Sanoria's Master of Architecture thesis, "Queeriosities of Space," at Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington. We ask how queer theory can inform architectural design through the concept of the closet. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* provides a central theoretical point of departure. Sedgwick's analysis centres on the unstable relationship between knowledge and concealment, disclosure and secrecy and the uneven conditions under which sexual identity becomes known.[2] These relationships are spatially relevant because architecture continually regulates degrees of access, visibility, exposure and retreat.

In "Queeriosities of Space," the closet was developed as a spatial framework for investigating how architecture might accommodate changing relationships between privacy and exposure, protection and visibility and individual and collective life. This interpretation provides a conceptual thread connecting the theoretical research with a series of architectural experiments and, subsequently, two site-specific design proposals.

The inquiry here is situated within the established field of research through design, in which designing, making, testing and reflecting can contribute to the production of architectural knowledge.[3] Christopher Frayling's distinctions between research into, through and for art and design establish a vocabulary for understanding different relationships between research and creative practice. Amongst other architectural practitioners and researchers, Murray Fraser has examined the role of design research within architecture,[4] while Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio have also used design experimentation to investigate social, cultural and theoretical questions.[5] The contribution of this article lies in applying this established research approach to queer theory through the spatial possibilities of the closet.

The design process began with theoretical investigations into sexuality, gender, performativity, visibility and queer space. These ideas were translated into drawings, diagrams, models and speculative architectural propositions, each providing an opportunity to examine their spatial implications. As the research developed, community engagement through interviews and questionnaires in the Philippines and Aotearoa New Zealand introduced situated experiences of privacy, visibility, safety, belonging, care and self-expression.

The research subsequently developed two site-specific design alternatives: an adaptive reuse proposal in Manila and a queer social and cultural venue in Wellington. Both projects emerged from the same conceptual enquiry but responded to different cultural, social and urban conditions. Their comparison provides a means of examining how the closet can generate different architectural questions when situated within different contexts.

This article argues that Sedgwick's concept of the closet can operate as a productive design framework through which relationships between identity and space can be investigated. Its architectural application allows questions of concealment, visibility, safety, belonging and participation to be explored through spatial organisation, thresholds, circulation, programme and occupation. The paper contributes to architectural research by demonstrating how queer theory, situated community knowledge and research through design can be brought together through a common conceptual framework while allowing architectural responses to remain culturally specific.

TRANSLATING QUEER THEORY INTO SPATIAL INQUIRY

The theoretical foundation of this research was developed through an iterative research-through-design process in which theory and design evolved together. From the outset, the literature review was accompanied by a series of visual and spatial investigations that enabled theoretical concepts to be interpreted, synthesised and critically examined through architectural experimentation. Drawings, illustrations, diagrams and physical models therefore operated as analytical tools that made abstract ideas available for spatial investigation.

The research-through-design process followed a recurring sequence (Figure 1). A theoretical concept or question was identified through the literature, interpreted through drawings and diagrams and then developed into a three-dimensional spatial model. Each stage altered the way the initial concept was understood and generated questions for the next investigation. The process therefore moved repeatedly between reading, making and reflection, with design experiments contributing to the development of the theoretical enquiry.

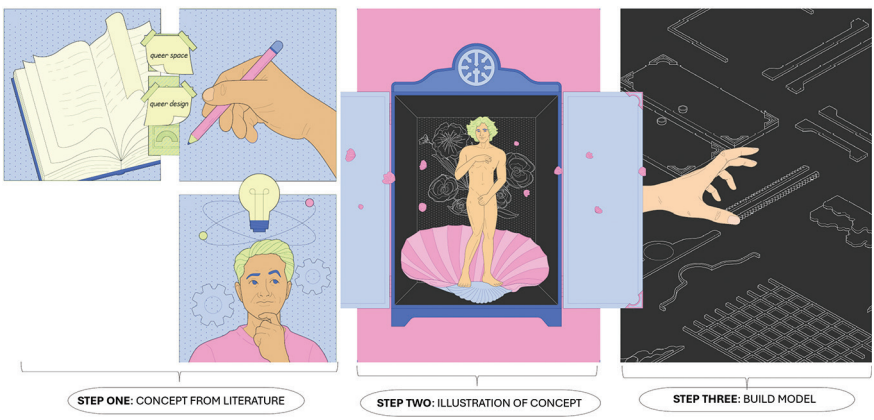


Figure 1. Research-through-design framework illustrating the iterative translation of theoretical concepts into illustrations, conceptual drawings and spatial models.

This approach builds on established research-through-design methodologies described by Frayling and Fraser, in which design activity can contribute to the production of knowledge through cycles of making, reflection and evaluation (Frayling 1993; Fraser 2013).[6] In "Queeriosities of Space," these cycles were used to investigate how queer theory could be given spatial form and tested through architectural propositions. The theoretical literature informed the questions posed through design, while the design experiments provided a means of examining the spatial consequences of those questions.

The initial investigations drew on Michel Foucault, Judith Butler and Sedgwick.[7] Foucault's analysis of sexuality and power, Butler's account of gender performativity and Sedgwick's examination of the closet established related questions concerning identity, disclosure, social recognition and the production of normative categories. These ideas were translated into abstract spatial studies that explored relationships between enclosure and exposure, separation and connection and individual and collective occupation.

Through these investigations, Sedgwick's concept of the closet became the central framework of the research (Figure 2.A). The experiments explored the closet as a condition of changing visibility: a space can conceal, protect, expose, connect or separate, depending on how it is entered, occupied and perceived. This interpretation shifted the closet from an image of a concealed interior towards a spatial relationship between different degrees of visibility and privacy. It also provided a way of connecting the theoretical discussion to architectural elements such as thresholds, enclosure, circulation and access.

The subsequent investigations examined architectural binaries associated with these relationships. Drawing on discussions of urban and architectural spaces and queer identities by Matt Cook and Jennifer V. Evans, Eric O. Clarke, Olivier Vallerand and Shinsuke Eguchi, the research explored distinctions between public and private space, visibility and concealment and normative and alternative forms of occupation.[8] Drawings and models tested how thresholds, circulation, enclosure and spatial ambiguity could alter these relationships (Figure 2.B).

A further body of literature on queer architecture and queer space, including the work of Aaron Betsky, Marko Jobst and Naomi Stead, Katarina Bonnevier, Adam Nathanial Furman and Joshua Mardell, Lucas Belury, Elizabeth Freeman and Vallerand, extended these investigations by considering relationships between bodies, identities, agency and the built environment.[9] The design studies focused on how queer space might be produced through these relationships, exploring how architecture can support multiple ways of inhabiting space through adaptability, negotiation and occupation (Figure 2.C).

The final phase of the literature review introduced a cross-cultural perspective through the work of Rapoport (Rapoport 1982), Kent (Kent, 1993), and Bonenberg (Bonenberg 2016).[10] Their research highlighted the importance of cultural values and social practices in shaping spatial experience, and informed the comparative investigation undertaken in the Philippines and Aotearoa New Zealand. This perspective established the importance of treating experiences of visibility, belonging, safety and identity as culturally situated, while recognising that some concerns may extend across different queer communities (Figure 2.D).

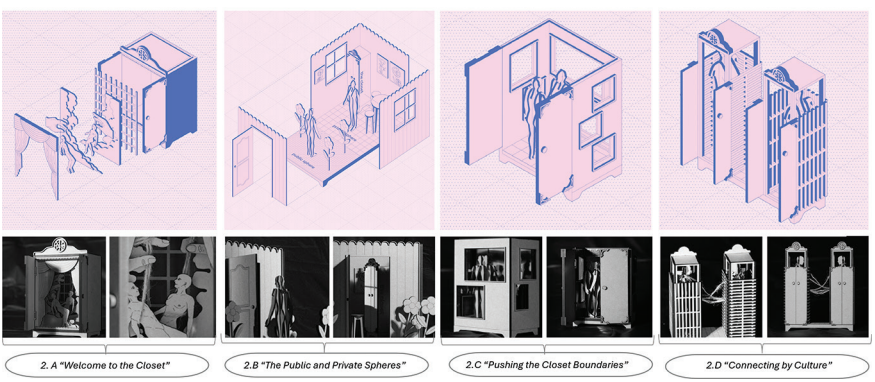


Figure 2. Iterative conceptual investigations translating queer theory into spatial studies of visibility, privacy, thresholds, occupation, agency and cultural difference.

Across these stages, the models functioned as research instruments. They provided opportunities to test spatial relationships, identify tensions within the theoretical concepts and determine which questions warranted further investigation. Four themes became particularly important: the closet as a spatial condition; the relationship between public and private space; changing degrees of visibility and self-expression; and the influence of cultural context on queer spatial experience.

These investigations established the conceptual framework for the next stage of the research. The theoretical and spatial questions developed through the models were subsequently considered alongside community interviews and questionnaires, allowing the research to move from abstract spatial inquiry towards site-specific architectural speculation in Manila and Wellington.

FROM CONCEPTUAL INQUIRY TO ARCHITECTURAL SPECULATION

The conceptual investigations described in the previous section established a series of spatial questions concerning visibility, privacy, enclosure, movement and occupation. The next stage brought these questions into contact with community interviews and questionnaires conducted with queer communities in Aotearoa New Zealand and the Philippines. Across the material collected, participants described experiences involving privacy, visibility, relationships between interior and exterior life, belonging and the need to move between different degrees of exposure. These experiences provided a basis for a speculative architectural investigation before the development of the two site-specific proposals.

The speculative project reinterpreted Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* through the spatial concept of the closet (Figure 3).[11] The familiar domestic house provided a recognisable architectural framework within which the relationships identified through the research could be tested. A transparent acrylic closet was placed at the centre of the composition, making an element associated with concealment visible and inhabitable. The closet became a threshold connecting previously separated domestic spaces and mediating between different degrees of exposure and privacy.

The use of transparency allowed the research to examine what happens when concealment becomes visible. The acrylic enclosure could be seen from surrounding spaces while remaining physically distinct from them. Its position altered the relationships between rooms, circulation and occupation, making visibility a spatial condition that changed according to the position of the occupant and the observer.

The model incorporated layered thresholds, fragmented spatial sequences, colour and varying degrees of enclosure. These elements allowed the design to test how spatial boundaries could become more or less permeable and how movement could alter relationships between interior and exterior, public and private and individual and collective occupation.

Although conceived as a speculative model rather than a full-scale architectural proposal, the project represents an important stage in the research. It brought together the theoretical investigations and community experiences developed in the preceding



Figure 3. Doll's house interpretation of the shared spatial experiences identified across queer communities in Aotearoa New Zealand and the Philippines. Through the closet, the proposal explores immersion, emotion and the negotiation of boundaries between interior and exterior, public and private.

stages and allowed them to be tested through architectural organisation, circulation, thresholds, enclosure and occupation. The experiment also raised a question that became central to the subsequent projects: how might a common conceptual framework produce different architectural responses when developed through different cultural contexts?

The question established the basis for the two site-specific design alternatives developed in Manila and Wellington. Community experiences remained an important reference throughout this stage, while the architectural responses became increasingly shaped by the particular histories, sites and social conditions of each context.

DESIGN ALTERNATIVES AS ARCHITECTURAL RESEARCH

The research subsequently developed two site-specific design alternatives in Manila and Wellington. Building on the conceptual and community-based investigations, each proposal tested how queer experience could be translated into architectural questions within its specific cultural and urban context. The following sections examine the development of the two projects.

Manila: Negotiating Visibility Through Adaptive Reuse

The Manila proposal emerged from engagement with members of the Golden Gays organisation and other queer participants living in Manila. Interviews and questionnaires identified recurring concerns around privacy, collective care, adaptability and visibility. Participants described how the expression of queer identity depended on social context, relationships and circumstance. These experiences raised a spatial question central to the project: how can architecture provide different degrees of exposure and retreat within the same environment?

The experiences of the Golden Gays were particularly influential in developing this question. Their shared residence operates as home, workplace, performance venue and support network. Domestic, cultural and communal activities overlap within limited resources, requiring spaces to accommodate changing patterns of occupation. This condition informed an architectural approach based on flexibility and collective use, with opportunities for retreat, social interaction and public engagement.

The First United Building (FUB), located in Manila's historic Escolta district, was selected as the site for the investigation because of its adaptive reuse and its existing role in artistic and community activities. Although the building was not designed as a queer space, it already accommodates activities associated with Manila's queer community. Its spatial organisation offered an important precedent for the project. Retail spaces open directly towards the surrounding streets, while the main entrance leads towards a more sheltered central area containing queer-related shops and activities. The movement from the street into the building therefore already established a transition between public accessibility and greater interior privacy.

The first site-specific design studies tested how this existing condition could be extended across the FUB and its neighbouring buildings (Figure 4). Successive iterations explored the retention of the historic façade, new connections between the buildings, circulation routes and the distribution of public, communal and residential functions. The studies progressively developed the idea of a layered threshold: the boundary between public and private activity could contain several intermediate conditions instead of functioning as a single dividing line.

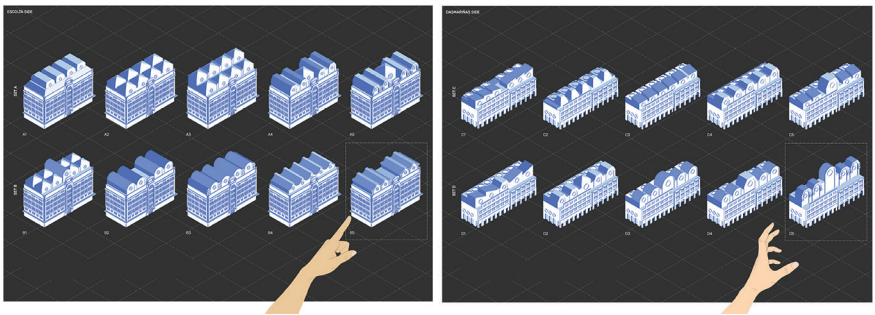


Figure 4. Iterative architectural studies exploring adaptive reuse strategies for the First United Building and adjacent buildings. Successive investigations tested relationships between heritage fabric, public and private space, circulation and collective occupation.

The final proposal transforms the FUB and two adjoining buildings into an interconnected complex supporting collective living, cultural production, performance and community care (Figure 8). The FUB accommodates predominantly social and cultural functions. Retail occupies the ground floor, community art and workshop spaces are located on Level 1, exhibition spaces on Level 2, food and social activities on Level 3 and an auditorium, bar and performance spaces on Level 4. This vertical organisation brings public activity into the lower levels while providing increasingly specialised collective and cultural spaces above.

The two adjoining buildings form a residential and communal structure connected to the FUB by bridges at the upper levels. The connection creates opportunities for interaction between the buildings, while maintaining a distinction between the public activities of the FUB and domestic occupation. Retail occupies the ground floor, with apartments beginning at Level 1.

The residential component introduces three apartment types based on different degrees of visibility and privacy identified through the research (Figure 5). The ‘fully out’ one- and two-bedroom apartments occupy the perimeter of the building and have the greatest exposure to the surrounding environment. The ‘partially out’ one-bedroom apartments face the FUB across the pedestrian connection, allowing visual engagement with the complex while maintaining greater separation from the street. The ‘closed’ studio apartments occupy the centre of the building and receive natural light through skylights, providing a more protected form of occupation.

These categories describe spatial conditions rather than fixed identities. A resident’s relationship to visibility can change according to circumstance, and the apartment types provide different architectural conditions through which that choice can be negotiated. The arrangement therefore connects the conceptual framework of the closet to a concrete architectural organisation: exposure and retreat are qualities of space that can be selected through occupation.

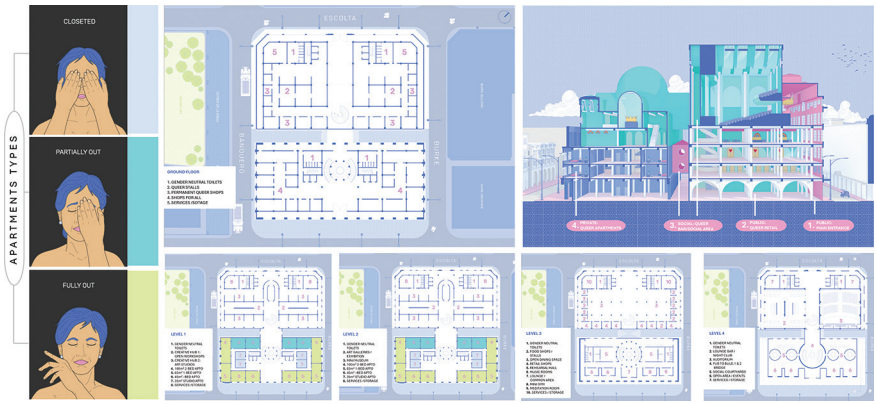


Figure 5. Plans and section of the final proposal illustrating the distribution of public, communal and residential programmes, including three apartment types with varying degrees of privacy and visibility.

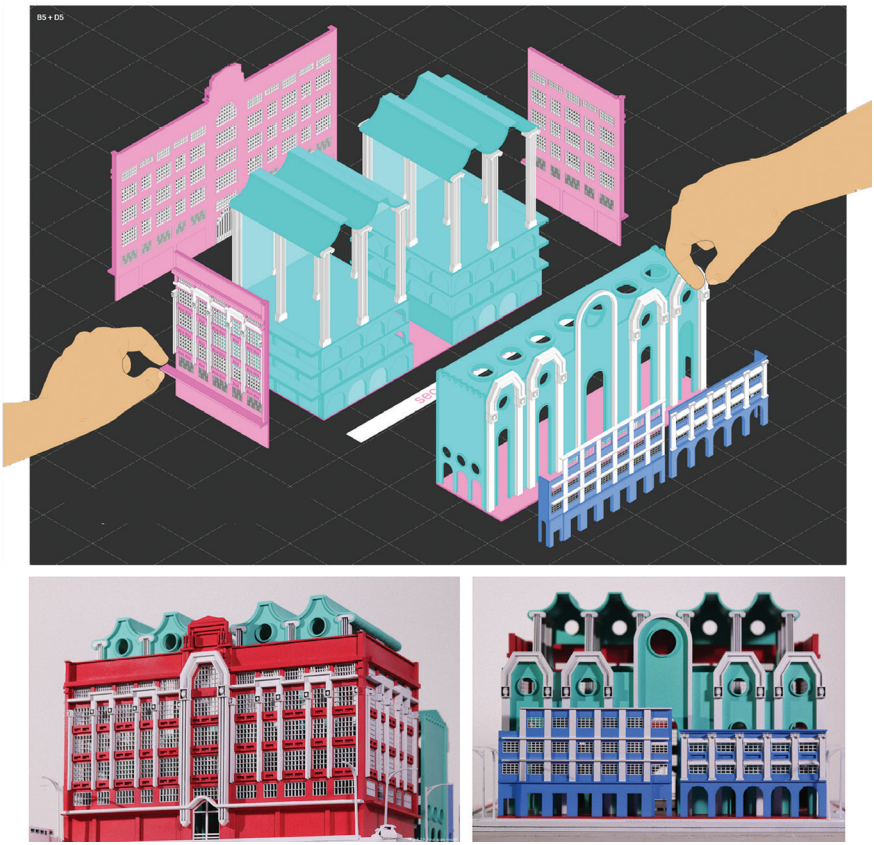


Figure 6. Perspectives and physical models of the final Manila proposal, illustrating the integration of retained historic façades with new architectural interventions.

The architectural treatment of the existing and new buildings reinforces this relationship between continuity and change (Figure 6). The heritage façade of the FUB is retained and combined with the rhythm and proportions of the adjoining buildings, while contemporary interventions introduce a more playful architectural language. Colour, material variation and new insertions contribute a distinct identity to the complex while maintaining a visual relationship with the historic character of Escolta. The retained fabric allows the project to remain connected to the existing urban context, while the new interventions make the community's presence more visible within it.

The public toilet facilities provide a further, more focused application of the project's spatial principles (Figure 7). The proposal organises the facilities according to degrees of privacy and interaction, with individual cubicles positioned alongside communal sinks and grooming areas. Privacy is provided at the level of personal use, while the shared areas support social interaction. The arrangement separates access to privacy from conventional gender divisions and allows occupants to determine their degree of engagement with others.

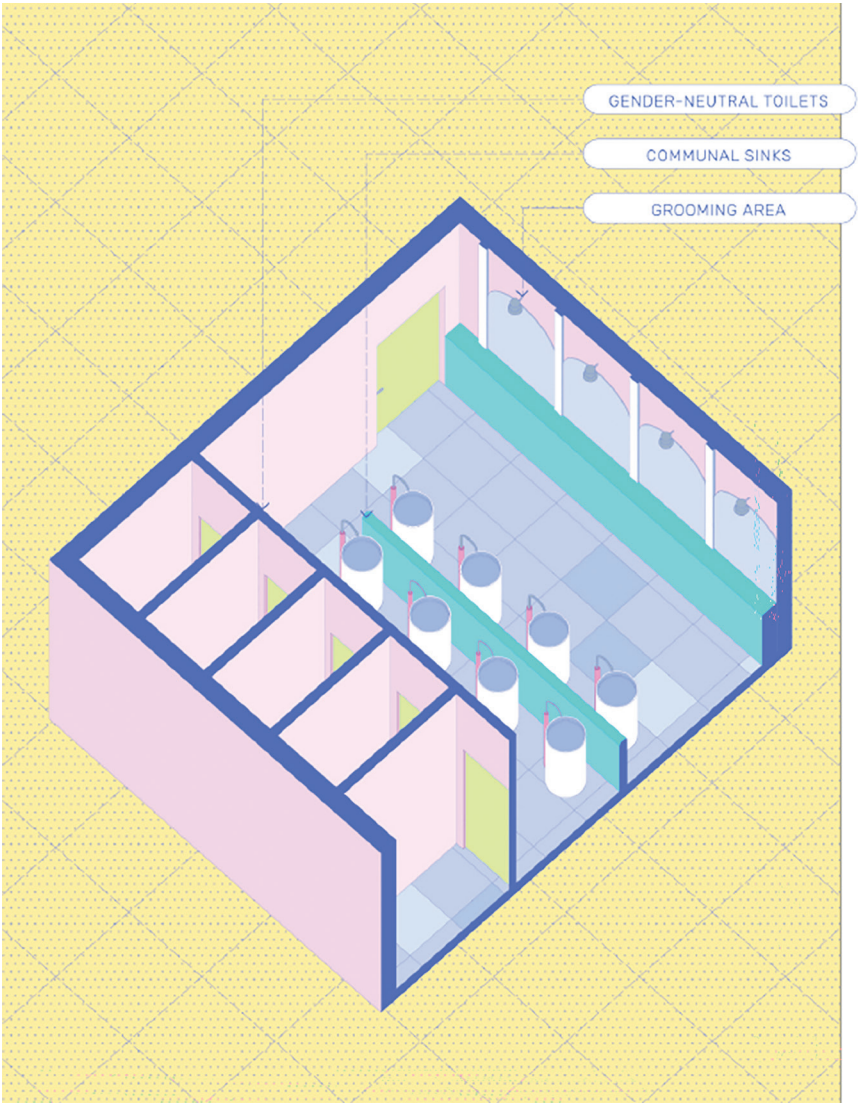


Figure 7. Gender-inclusive public toilets organised around graduated levels of privacy, combining individual cubicles with communal sinks and shared grooming areas.

The Manila proposal therefore demonstrates how the closet can become an architectural question about degrees of visibility and choice. Its application extends from the scale of the apartment to the organisation of the larger complex and to specific interior spaces. Adaptive reuse provides the broader framework through which these relationships are embedded within an existing urban and community context. The project shows how architectural organisation can accommodate different forms of queer inhabitation while retaining connections to the history and social life of the site.



Figure 8. Translation of community oral histories into architectural concepts for the Wellington proposal.

Wellington: Architecture of Transformation and Public Engagement

The Wellington proposal emerged from a context in which queer identities have greater legal recognition and public visibility, while experiences of exclusion, vulnerability and self-discovery remain part of queer life. The project was informed by preliminary interviews and questionnaires with queer communities across Aotearoa New Zealand, followed by more focused conversations with participants in Wellington.

Discussions with L and M were particularly influential in defining the programme and spatial organisation of the proposal. Their reflections highlighted the role that queer social spaces can play in processes of self-recognition and social connection. The experience of coming out emerged as an important theme, particularly in relation to

changing degrees of personal and public visibility. These conversations were considered alongside the history of Wellington's queer social spaces, including bars, clubs and community venues that have provided places for social interaction, performance and self-expression. Together, these sources informed the project's central question: how might architecture support movement between more private experiences of identity and participation in public life (Figure 8)?

The site occupies a prominent corner of Cuba Street and Swan Lane, historically associated with the former White Swan Hotel. Although the original building has been demolished, its presence and symbolic association with the site informed the design investigation. Cuba Street provided an additional cultural context through its history of artistic production, public performance, nightlife and social diversity. The project sought to establish a direct relationship with this public life by opening its programme and circulation towards the street.

The proposal, "The Pink Swan," is conceived as a queer social and cultural venue combining retail, lounge, exhibition and performance spaces. The programme accommodates different forms of occupation throughout the building, from quieter and more private activities to spaces designed for social gathering and public events. This functional organisation provided the architectural framework through which the research could investigate changing degrees of visibility and participation.

The initial design studies explored how the history of the White Swan could be reinterpreted through architectural elements associated with transition and openness. Arches, layered thresholds and interconnected volumes were tested as ways of connecting the building with the street while creating intermediate spaces between interior and exterior (Figure 9). The interviews also indicated a desire for greater visibility and integration with the wider community. In response, the design introduced spatial elements along the edge of the building where people could pause, meet, observe activity or participate, without necessarily entering the main interior spaces.

The design development subsequently shifted from the symbolic interpretation of the White Swan towards the organisation of spatial experience. The relationship between programme, circulation and degrees of enclosure became central to the proposal. Spaces were arranged so that movement through the building could provide different levels of privacy, social interaction and public exposure. The threshold was therefore extended beyond the building entrance and treated as a sequence of spatial conditions.

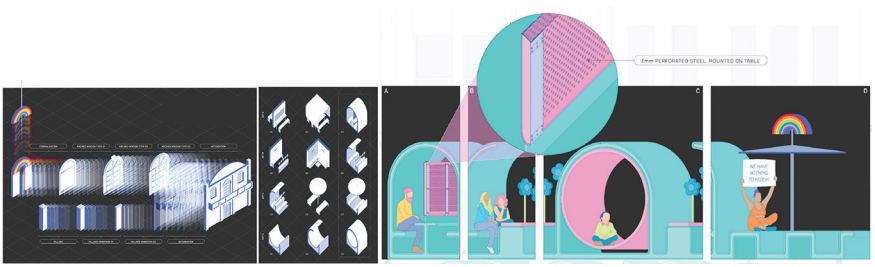


Figure 9. Design explorations for spatial elements that invite public interaction.

This sequence also developed the metaphor of the closet established through the earlier design investigations. In the Wellington project, the closet became the starting point for a movement through different degrees of visibility. The architectural sequence was intended to accommodate moments of retreat and reflection alongside opportunities for encounter and public participation. Movement through these spaces was not conceived as a one-way progression: occupants could move towards greater exposure or return to more private areas according to their circumstances.

The resulting organisation of The Pink Swan establishes a gradual relationship between the rear of the building and Cuba Street (Figure 10). Retail and lounge spaces are located towards the more secluded part of the site, providing quieter environments for individual or small-group occupation. Galleries and exhibition spaces occupy an intermediate position, connecting social and cultural activities. Towards Cuba Street, larger lounges and performance spaces establish the strongest relationship with public life. Changes in scale, height, openness and circulation reinforce these distinctions.

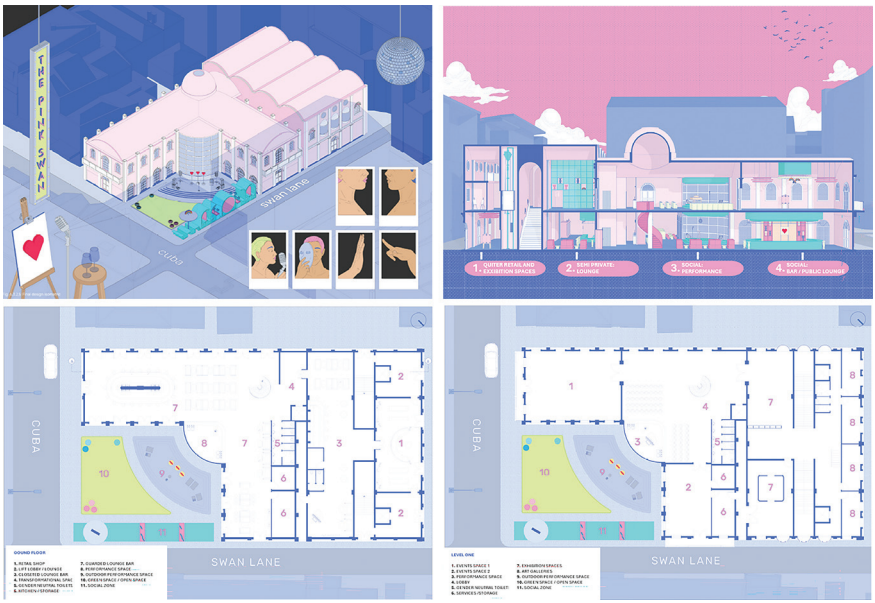


Figure 10. Plans, section and axonometric of The Pink Swan, showing the distribution of retail, lounge, exhibition and performance spaces in relation to Cuba Street, and varying degrees of privacy and openness.

The spatial sequence remains reversible. Occupants can move between more exposed and more private areas without having to follow a prescribed route (Figure 11). This quality is important to the project's interpretation of the closet because visibility is treated as a condition that can be adjusted according to circumstance. The architecture accommodates movement between participation and retreat, allowing individuals to determine their degree of exposure within the building.



Figure 11. The Pink Swan: Internal spaces establishing varying degrees of visibility and social interaction.

The relationship between the building and Cuba Street is therefore central to the proposal. Public space is not simply a destination at the end of the spatial sequence; it forms part of the building's programme and identity. The open lounges, performance areas, exhibition spaces and street-facing thresholds create opportunities for queer cultural activity to become part of everyday urban life.

Through The Pink Swan, the closet operates as a framework for investigating how architecture can organise changing relationships between private experience and public participation. The project translates this enquiry into programme, circulation, thresholds and degrees of enclosure, producing a social and cultural venue in which occupants can choose different forms of engagement. The architectural proposition connects personal processes of self-recognition with opportunities for collective and public expression, while remaining open to different experiences of visibility and participation (Figure 12).

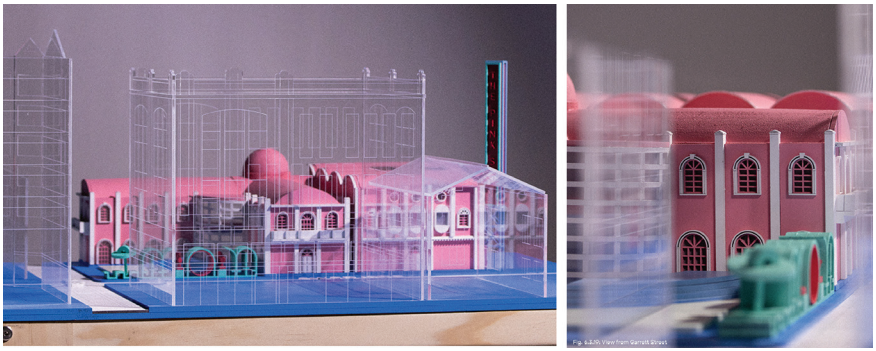


Figure 12. Physical models of The Pink Swan proposal.

Architectural Implications

Read together, the two projects show that queer-informed architectural research is necessarily situated. A shared conceptual framework produced different architectural responses because it was developed through specific cultural, social and urban conditions. The research therefore points to adaptability as an important quality of queer space, allowing relationships between privacy, visibility, encounter and participation to change according to circumstance.

The closet provides the conceptual connection between these investigations. Its interpretation across the two projects demonstrates how a theoretical concept can become a spatial framework without prescribing a fixed architectural form. Through design, relationships between concealment and visibility, retreat and participation, can be examined as conditions of occupation and movement.

The research also demonstrates the value of bringing community knowledge into design enquiry. Interviews and questionnaires informed the questions pursued through architectural experimentation, while drawings and models provided means of testing possible spatial responses. This reciprocal relationship between lived experience, theory and design constitutes an important methodological contribution of "Queeriosities of Space." The research has been presented through an interactive installation at the 2024 New Zealand Institute of Architects (NZIA) Resene Student Design Awards, bringing the two projects together through the shared framework of the closet (Figure 13). The work received the NZIA Student Design Award, providing disciplinary recognition and a public platform for communicating the research.

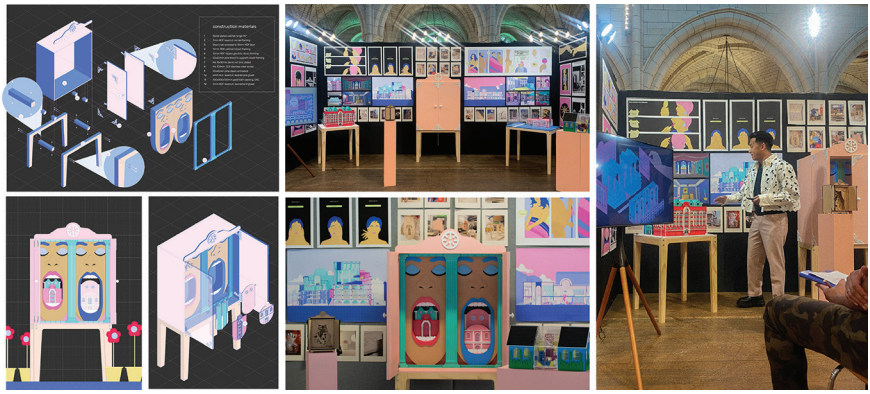


Figure 13. Exhibition installation presenting the research findings through interactive and visual design media at the 2024 NZIA Student Design Awards.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined how queer theory can inform architectural design research through "Queeriosities of Space." The research brought together theoretical enquiry, community engagement, contextual investigation and iterative design to explore how experiences of queer identity can become architectural questions. The process moved between reading, listening, drawing, modelling and architectural speculation, with each stage contributing to the development of the next.

The research identifies Sedgwick's concept of the closet as a productive framework for this process. Its architectural interpretation provided a way to investigate relationships between concealment and visibility, privacy and exposure, safety and participation. The two design proposals demonstrated how these relationships could be interpreted differently when situated within distinct cultural and social contexts. The closet consequently operated as an open conceptual framework whose architectural meaning developed through engagement with specific experiences and places.

The community interviews and questionnaires were important to this process because they introduced situated experiences that shaped the questions pursued through design. These accounts informed the development of architectural strategies without determining a single formal response. Design provided a means of testing how experiences of identity, visibility, belonging and participation might be organised spatially, while the resulting propositions opened further questions for investigation.

The methodological contribution of the research lies in bringing these forms of knowledge into a reciprocal design process. Research through design provides an established basis for generating architectural knowledge through making, testing and reflection. "Queeriosities of Space" extends this approach by placing queer theory and situated community knowledge within the design process and using the closet as a conceptual framework for spatial experimentation.

The research also demonstrates the value of allowing architectural responses to remain culturally situated. The projects did not seek to establish a common formal language for queer space. Their different outcomes emerged from the particular experiences, histories and urban conditions investigated in Manila and Wellington. This provides a basis for architectural research that takes difference seriously and allows context to influence the questions and spatial strategies developed through design.

The implications extend beyond queer architectural research. The approach offers a way for architectural educators and practitioners to engage with communities whose experiences have received limited representation within architectural discourse. Community narratives can introduce questions that are subsequently explored through drawing, modelling and spatial experimentation, creating opportunities for architectural knowledge to develop through engagement with lived experience.

"Queeriosities of Space" therefore contributes a way of working with queer theory through architectural design: listening to situated experiences, identifying spatial questions, testing them through design and reflecting on the knowledge that emerges. The research positions the closet as a particularly productive framework for this process, allowing architecture to investigate changing relationships between identity, visibility, belonging, and inhabitation.

Illustrations: Figures 1-13, Josh Sanoria, "Queeriosities of Space," Master of Architecture (Prof.), Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington, 2025, https://doi.org/10.26686/wgtn.29336090.

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Josh Sanoria is an architectural graduate whose background in fine arts and graphic design informs a people-centred design approach. His Master of Architecture (Professional) thesis engaged with under-represented communities and inclusive spatial practices. In 2024, his work received the Team Architects Premium Award and the NZIA Student Design Award. He is currently employed at Stapleton Elliott Architects.

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