

Dirty Furniture

when design leaves the showroom

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The Closet Metaphor

The closet has long been a cypher for our sexual skeletons. Critic *Jeremy Atherton Lin* tracks the design of the closet to ask whether the architecture of emergence is still relevant.

I'm not only out of the closet; I'm over it. My partner and I rely on a kind of post-closet configuration. Neither freestanding wardrobe nor built-in, the system comprises rail, shelves and cabinet, fitted in an alcove and unconcealed. It's a modest example of Vitsœ's 606 Universal Shelving System, which operates on an ingeniously simple suspension method: metal shelves and cabinets appear to levitate when in fact they depend on small notched pins that slip into position along wall-mounted aluminium tracks. First designed by Dieter Rams in 1960, the design appears suffused with social optimism – as the 'universal' in the name suggests – and is regarded as a masterstroke of reduction. The apparatus endeavours to disappear. If it conveys an invisible quality, that's not because it sheathes the clothes; rather, at first glance they're all you see. The drawers don't lock and the shelves are unshuttered. Shirts and trousers hang out in plain sight. From my bed I take inventory of plaids, indigo and army green, fabrics such as denim, corduroy and twill, the stuffs once relegated to manual labour, gradually appropriated by a century and a half of homosexuals before me. This post-

closet harbours no secrets – it’s a candid, even boastful display. The only protection afforded against moths is exposure: it would be daredevil of the pests to frolic so publicly.

The word ‘closet’, from the Old French *clos*, first indicated an enclosure, then eventually a bedchamber or secret room used for private study or prayer. References to this solitudinous space can be found in Chaucer and other literature of the late Middle Ages as well as in the 1611 *King James Bible*: ‘Let the bridegroom go forth of his chamber, and the bride out of her closet.’ By the 1700s, such closets provided the only private domestic space available to the upper classes, as the fuff of multiple clothing layers required the presence of servants all the way through to the bathroom. In twentieth-century queer literature, young protagonists can be found inhabiting makeshift iterations of such personal space. A girl called Stephen, in Radclyffe Hall’s 1928 novel *The Well of Loneliness*, takes refuge in her father’s studio, ‘as though drawn there by some strong natal instinct’. A boy, also Stephen, in Sanford Friedman’s 1961 bildungsroman *Totempole*, stows away in a bathhouse stall, a ‘dark cell’ where he can ‘think his private thoughts, hold dialogues with imaginary friends, store treasures and eavesdrop on neighbors.’ In subsequent passages, Stephen experiments alone behind closed doors, masturbating and prancing in his mother’s skirt and a jockstrap pilfered from his father’s chifferobe.

The first recorded use of the phrase ‘come out of the closet’ is thought to be in Sylvia Plath’s 1965 poem ‘The Applicant’: ‘Come here, sweetie, out of the closet.’ Plath’s meaning is ambiguous; at the time, the phrase referred more commonly to other skeletons, such as alcoholism. The expression ‘skeletons in the closet’ had been used, since at least the early nineteenth century, to describe secrets so dire and long-held they are analogous to the decomposed corpse of a murder victim. ‘Coming out’, sans the closet, was in queer parlance from at least the 1940s: in several pre-war American cities, it meant being formally presented, like a debutante, at the drag balls hosted by gay society. These events were on the public record; ‘coming out’ indicated an arrival, but not necessarily emergence from shadow. In 1967, the word ‘closet’ appeared in the liberating (albeit dated) psychology text *Homosexual Behavior among Males* by Wainwright Churchill, who wrote, ‘The “closet queen” or so-called latent homosexual becomes a menace...to the entire community.’ The ‘coming out of the closet’ idiom appears to have proliferated in gay communities from the late 1960s, with the abbreviated ‘come out’ becoming common in the same period. One of the earliest examples is a 1971 article on gay London life in *The Observer*: “‘I enjoy my life’, said a delicate youth wearing a gold chain belt in a Chelsea pub, “‘I don’t want to come out.’”

The idiom is an evocative one, and the particular closet it brings to mind may be a wardrobe: forbidding, solid and bulky. Originating in ancient chests and military trunks, the wardrobe’s evolution as a stand-alone hanging cupboard dates to the early seventeenth century. For a period, a rather delightful unit of measurement called ‘eight small men’ was used to gauge adequate capacity. A portmanteau of the Old Northern French *warde* and *robe*, the word originally indicated the safekeeping of a royal’s cloak. The wardrobe is a guarded secret. Gaston Bachelard later wrote, ‘Does there exist a single dreamer of words who does not respond to the word wardrobe?’ In his seminal 1958 book *The Poetics of Space*, the phenomenologist enthused: ‘A wardrobe’s inner space is also *intimate space*, space that is not open to just anybody.’

I've been considering whether the expression conjures a particular closet for me. I've lived with a jumbled timeline of closets. A vintage wooden wardrobe, thick with versicoloured layers of paint, came included in a Shoreditch one-bedroom because the previous tenant deemed it too heavy to take with him. A deep walk-in, burrowed in a San Francisco garden flat, proved such a damp cavity that pernicious mould eventually ravaged heaps of clothing. The mirrored sliding doors of the built-in along the central wall of a West Hollywood bungalow ostensibly created the illusion of a larger room, but perhaps more effectively offered a relentless portrait of my student-era disgrace. Inside that closet could be found a pile of sweaty skater gear, a plaid schoolgirl skirt I timidly donned one Halloween, a couple of rather sweet vintage magazines I'd nervously purchased at a gay adult shop... Looking back on such fixtures, I have to wonder whether the sleek Vitsœ configuration – elevated, spartan, functional, clean – is adequate to sustain the power of the idiom, and its attendant air of mystery.

Discretion was a guiding principle in the invention of the built-in. 'From the moment of its first appearance,' the architectural historian Henry Urbach wrote in his 1996 essay 'Closets, Clothes, disClosure', the built-in 'not only concealed its contents, but also (almost) hid itself.' The advent of the built-in closet is commonly traced to the infamous Dakota Building, the Manhattan apartments erected from 1880. While there is proof of built-in storage from some forty years prior in home journals and domestic manuals, the Dakota makes for an alluring origin myth; the storied building is the location of the unsettling 1968 film *Rosemary's Baby* and the site of John Lennon's assassination. Urbach describes the introduction of the built-in as a kind of polite intervention. Eliminating the bulk of the wardrobe and armoire, it was intended not only to hide its contents away, but to be inconspicuous itself. This, Urbach suspects, is never completely possible. 'There is always some seam, gap, hinge, knob, or pull...'

The built-in, then, may be equivalent to an open secret or whispered rumour. Its invention roughly coincided with the social construction of homosexuality: Michel Foucault dated the birth of the word to 1870, with only slight inaccuracy (the neologism can be traced to 1868). In the late nineteenth century in Europe and the United States, quack medics and sanctimonious politicians worked feverishly to develop spurious profiles of homosexual men as predators and deviants, replete with absurd physiognomic data. The coining of 'homosexual' meant that what was once deemed a type of perverse activity had become an identity, potentially an aberration to be pathologised and treated punitively. The development of the built-in closet provides a trenchant and darkly comical analogy, in which soiled undesirables are banished but – thanks to that telltale handle, visible interstice or audible swoosh – never fully disappear from the room.

The Vitsœ 606 conforms to the modernist ethos of transparency. In his 1925 essay 'A Coat of Whitewash: The Law of Ripolin', Le Corbusier decreed 'no more dirty, dark corners. Everything is shown as it is.' In 1944, American modernist George Nelson created the Storgewall, a media cabinet featuring banks of open-faced units. It reads like a series of revelations. The conceit is that no object is worth possessing that isn't fit to be displayed. By 1974, Terence Conran's game-changing *House Book* was casting scorn upon the notion of stuffing one's bests in a fusty wardrobe. 'Show what you've got!,' it euphemistically proclaimed. Vitsœ, USM and other venerable manufacturers have at various points introduced clothing rails into their modular shelving

programmes, blurring the distinction between closet and bookshelf, the latter of which is more traditionally associated with open display. Ikea, of course, offers mass-market versions. The Elvarli is lattice-like: without front or back, it can be installed on posts and set away from the wall, doubling as a see-through room divider.

Le Corbusier reasoned that his crisp design ethos would yield an ‘inner cleanness’ and a ‘refusal to allow anything at all which is not correct, authorised, intended, desired, thought-out: no action before thought.’ In its quest for the clean line, modernism exposed a prudish streak. From this the queer imagination has invented compelling deviance; the designer Eileen Gray, for instance, known to mix in the lesbian literary circles of Paris in the 1920s and 30s, responded to Le Corbusier specifically: ‘Yes! We will be killed by hygiene.’ Gray rendered environments of stealth and half-disclosures, objects and rooms that behave in coquettish ways. The critic Jasmine Rault has contrasted Le Corbusier’s reductive approach with Gray’s cagey, sensual proclivities, her ‘sapphic modernity’. Inside Gray’s iconic E1027 house, built in 1929 overlooking the Bay of Monaco, screens and walls mask a central spiral staircase. Furthermore, within the walls of the hidden staircase, a series of pocket-like closets are secreted. The architect and researcher Katarina Bonnevier has called this ‘a kind of double interiority, as well as a double concealment.’

In 1930, a new Manhattan residential showpiece, 740 Park Avenue, was unveiled. It became known for its ample closets – ‘Bigger than rooms’, a doorman is reported to have stated – setting a precedent for the walk-in. In 1978, the 17-year-old carpenter Neil Balter started his own customisation company, California Closets, making the walk-in a desirable suburban amenity and marching the closet into the too-much-information era of *MTV Cribs* and *Sex and the City* through to Instagram and Pinterest. The walk-in closet could be considered antithetical to the private closets of the Middle Ages – it is meant to find a way to be seen. An uncanny feeling permeates Sofia Coppola’s 2013 film *The Bling Ring*; when the aspirational teenage thieves play dress-up in Paris Hilton’s Beverly Hills walk-in, the viewer senses that such troves, overstuffed with uncherished designer togs, were lying in wait for precisely this kind of external adulation. My Vitsoe may put my belongings on display, but the walk-in flagrantly and ceremoniously makes a display of oneself. To come out of a walk-in closet is to come out with a bang. The idiomatic equivalent is the confession by Ellen DeGeneres over a PA system in her sitcom *Ellen* in 1997. As iconic and culturally beneficial as that event proved to be, it also marked the emergence of a kind of reverse-closet policing; it’s now considered justifiable to resent a celebrity suspected of being gay but who has chosen to stay discreetly in. In a climate in which both domestic and psychological interiors have become public-facing, everyone claims a sense of ownership.

I am reminded of Annie Proulx’s short story ‘Brokeback Mountain’ – published in *The New Yorker* the same year as Ellen’s coming out. In it, the cowboy Ennis finds a shirt in the bedroom closet of his deceased lover, Jack Twist. Stuffed into one of its sleeves, he discovers a second shirt, once belonging to himself, ‘the pair like two skins, one inside the other, two in one. He pressed his face into the fabric and breathed in slowly through his mouth and nose, hoping for the faintest smoke and mountain sage and salty sweet stink of Jack...’ At the end of Ang Lee’s film version, the shirts are revealed to have migrated to the wardrobe door in Ennis’s trailer, where they share the same hanger, like spooning lovers. *Brokeback Mountain* would provide the hegemonic closet

narrative of the 2000s, bringing a romance between two men into the mainstream, and implying that life for gays could be wholesome, more assimilated, sanitised – neater – if only society let such a pair, from that den of iniquity in the guise of a storage unit, come out for fresh air. In an amusing coda, the shirts from the film were sold at a charity auction for over US\$100,000 and subsequently loaned to the Autry Museum of the American West in Los Angeles, where they are proudly displayed in a glass cabinet along with a placard addressing the admirable contributions of gay folks to rural communities.

‘...so we are out of the closet, but into what?’, wrote the queer theorist Judith Butler in 1991, ‘what new unbounded spatiality? the room, the den, the attic, the basement, the house, the bar, the university, some new enclosure whose door, like Kafka’s door, produces the expectation of a fresh air and a light of illumination that never arrives?’ Being pressured out in the husk of some off-the-peg stereotype hardly feels liberating. Instead, why not push everyone in? It’s fun inside a closet, after all – ripe for a game of seven-minutes-in-heaven or hide-and-seek. In closets, we reaffirm the value of confusion and flux, destabilising absolutes, and instead recognise identity as a process. Closets embody this potential for malleability; they invite the thrill of experimentation. On the set of the reality show *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, the contestants share the same communal space, a combination of dressing room and workshop, at once lofty and full of nooks, an interstitial zone of both broadcast and privacy, individuality and togetherness. The queens’ garments can be glimpsed variously in trunks, on rails, in piles on the floor. It could be said that the *Drag Race* contestants attract such a rabid fan base because the audience spends so much intimate time with them there, half-dressed and deliberating. The audience comes to recognise individuals unresolved and multivalent, on the cusp of transformation, in a state of in-between.

Now, being post-closet myself, I have to wonder: in my modernist inclinations, have I deprived myself of the sanctum in which to stow any remaining skeletons? It’s telling that the early use of the idiom, by that delicate London youth in 1971, was a statement of resistance: *I don’t want to come out*. The approbation of the act of exiting the closet, increasingly the norm throughout many liberal societies, has a niggling side effect: it takes away some of the thrill. In tandem, the modernist tendency towards all things airy and open risks the same trap as the mainstream rhetoric of gay visibility. For all the admirable intentions of each, both can suppress complexity. We risk plastering over hidden depths.

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