

# THE HOUSE OF ALL SORTS: *Domestic Spaces in British Columbia*<sup>1</sup>

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Everywhere at hand / the implements and habits of familiar ease.  
– David Zieroth

Home is not, is an ache  
– Daphne Marlatt

The house is humble and commodious as a quartet or a  
submerged ship  
– Office for Soft Architecture

**L**IKE THE “HOUSE OF ALL SORTS”<sup>2</sup> in Victoria over which Emily Carr presided as landlady, the domestic spaces in British Columbia discussed in this special issue of *BC Studies* are “of all sorts.” Often unacknowledged, perhaps because of their personal, private, everyday quality, the houses, homes, gardens, and material objects that constitute domestic spaces are nevertheless crucial to our (well-) being in

<sup>1</sup> The idea for this special issue emerged from a workshop entitled “Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Domestic Space,” held at Harbour Centre, Simon Fraser University, April 2001, and sponsored by the Graduate Liberal Studies program, the Department of Humanities, and the Institute for the Humanities at SFU. Several of the workshop participants are published here (Dara Culhane, Sherry McKay, Paige Raibmon); the other contributors, who were engaged in projects related to domestic space, were invited to submit papers. For assistance with this project, I thank my collaborator on the domestic space project, Dr. Chiara Briganti; my excellent research assistants, Lisa Pitt and Helen Loshny; and Steve Duguid, Chair, Department of Humanities. For their responsiveness, encouragement, and conversation, I thank Dara Culhane, Sherry McKay, Paige Raibmon, Gerry Pratt, Aaron Wilson, and Rita Wong. Those interested in pursuing the study of domestic space are welcome to view and contribute to the Domestic Space Web site and bibliography. <<http://www.sfu.ca/domestic-space/>>

<sup>2</sup> Emily Carr, *The House of All Sorts* (Toronto: Irwin, 1944). In 1913 Emily Carr built an apartment house in Victoria, next to Beacon Hill Park, which she called the house of all sorts, and which she managed for over twenty years. Her memoir recounts her adventures and difficulties with the human and animal menagerie that came and went.

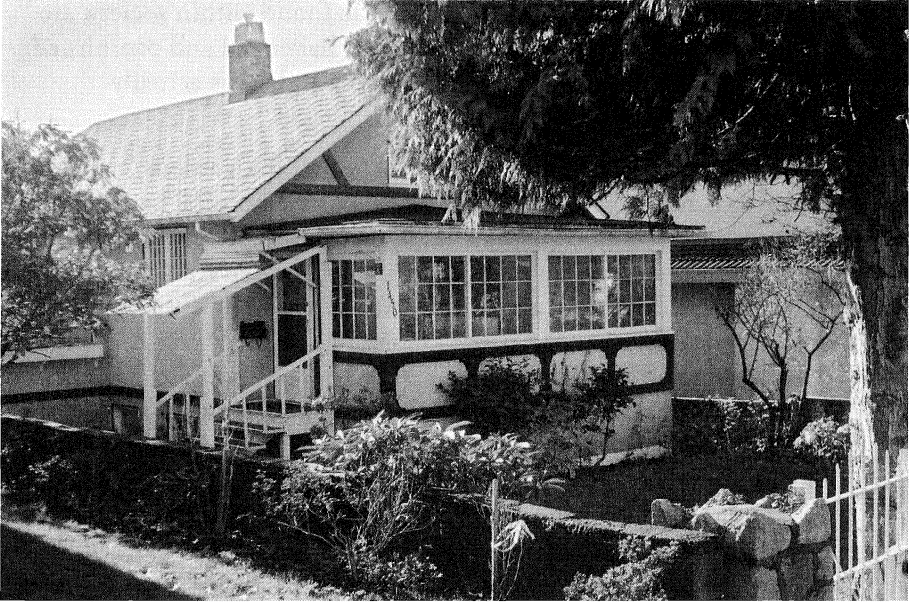
the world, to a sense of belonging, to our personal and collective identity.<sup>3</sup> As geographers Béatrice Collignon and Jean-François Staszak observe: “where research on public space has flourished within Social Sciences, private space has received as yet little attention, despite its obvious importance in our everyday lives.”<sup>4</sup> Yet consider the front page of the *Vancouver Sun* on Saturday, 13 September 2003,<sup>5</sup> in which three headlines focus on different “sorts” of domestic space. Splashed across the top of the page, the leader reads, “Council Retreats on Home-Based Escort Zone.” Reporter Frances Bula’s accompanying story, “Angry Public Feared Prostitution in Residential Areas,” recounts the anxieties and debates over a (rescinded) Vancouver City Council decision to allow escort services and massage parlours to operate in a new downtown live/work zone. The second news item concerns the terrible summer fires in British Columbia’s Interior and the destruction not only of thousands of acres of forests and farmlands but also of hundreds of houses and the subsequent displacement of many families. The third headline, “Health Region Will Close Beds to Balance Budget,” refers to hospital bed and ward closures by the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority. These very different domestic spaces of disguised brothel, hospital bed, and burnt-out homes and gardens of the Interior, oddly clustered together, are newsworthy precisely because they touch our daily lives, safety, families, health, sexual fears and desires, and pocketbooks. As these news headlines and stories indicate, private home spaces and households are coming increasingly under public scrutiny, exposure, and regulation. At the same time, external forces like the globalized economy, acts of international violence, unleashed weather and natural phenomena such as fire, flood, and earthquake extend their tentacles deeper into our private lives. As a consequence, the articulation and tending of the local and of domestic space becomes more desirable.

Consider, too, another recent news item, a press release on 23 September 2003, announcing: “A Canadian Literary Treasure – House of Obasan Up for Sale.” This house, at 1450 West 64th Avenue, appears in Joy Kogawa’s renowned 1981 novel *Obasan*, which evoked the wartime mass uprooting and internment of Japanese-Canadians and introduced many Canadians to this sordid event in our history for the first time.

<sup>3</sup> Distinctions between house and home are the subject of ongoing debates, as is the meaning of home. For our purposes here, I suggest that a house is a built form with a fixed location in which a constellation of people dwell and that a home is an idea or concept rather than a material form (and one that is fluid, ranging from a built dwelling place to cyberspace homepages to homelessness).

<sup>4</sup> Preamble to the *Espaces domestiques/Domestic Spaces Conference* (Paris, 17–20 September 2002). (<http://www.cybergeopresse.fr/actualit/colloq/domspa.htm>, 12 December 2002).

<sup>5</sup> *Vancouver Sun*, Saturday, 13 September 2003, A1.



Joy Kogawa's house portrayed in *Obasan*, photographed by Kathy Mezei.

Joy Kogawa, who happened to drive by her childhood home on a recent visit to Vancouver, noticed the “For Sale” sign; she remarked: “I always wanted to go back home. It was such a splendid house in my mind, a castle, compared to everything afterwards. The old, old cherry tree is still there in the back yard – terribly wounded and weeping sap – but miraculously alive” (Roy Miki, Press Release, 23 September 2003). At the heart of cultural memory, literary imagination, and our sense of history are the home and the garden, particularly the childhood home, remembered, invented, rewritten. As Gaston Bachelard (1994, xxxci) famously commented in his influential *Poetics of Space*: “the house image would appear to have become the topography of our intimate being.” If this small house, a misfit among the large new homes of South Vancouver, can be saved as a historic site or heritage monument, it would acknowledge the importance of house and novel and personal history to our collective sense of identity as British Columbians as well as the public significance of this specific intimate space.

Two of the “homes” signalled in the *Sun* headlines reflect what Michel Foucault has called heterotopic, or other, spaces, that is:

real and effective spaces which are outlined in the very institution of society, but which constitute a sort of counter-arrangement, of effectively realized utopia, in which all the real arrangements, all

the other real arrangements that can be found within society, are at one and the same time represented, challenged and overturned: a sort of place that lies outside all places and yet is actually localizable. (352)

Heterotopias, which for Foucault include ships, gardens, cemeteries, boarding schools, heterotopias of deviance (the hospital bed), brothels, and colonies, resonate with the analysis of domestic or “other” spaces undertaken here by Dara Culhane, Paige Raibmon, Rita Wong, Aaron Wilson, Geraldine Pratt, and Sherry McKay as well as with the evocation of domestic spaces by the poets Daphne Marlatt, David Zieroth, and the Office for Soft Architecture. Under observation are “all sorts” of heterotopias: a residential psychiatric facility in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside (Wilson), female researchers and informants negotiating time-space constraints and inequities in the Downtown Eastside (Culhane), the spectacle of Aboriginal domestic space at the 1893 Chicago World Fair (Raibmon), the futuristic walled city of Serendipity in Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl* (Wong), and an idealized home in the Philippines for Filipino-Canadian youth (Pratt). These are “places that lie outside all places” and yet are “actually localizable” – in some cases through the narration of stories (Pratt, Wong, Raibmon). Even the more conventional domestic spaces in Sherry McKay’s discussion of West End apartments and Strathcona housing projects segue into heterotopias as planners imagine and strive to implement regulated, sanitized, and modernized communities (Strathcona) and appropriate dwelling spaces for singles and widows (West End).

Along with the general populace, students and academics are sometimes surprisingly unaware of the impact of domestic space upon their personal and communal well-being; equally muted is the impact of community and institutions upon domestic space. Despite its pervasiveness and resonance, domestic space, however, remains relatively unexplored and underexposed as a subject of scholarly inquiry. It is this lack that the following articles address across a spectrum of disciplines and conceptualizations of domestic space. They join the work of scholars who have touched upon representations and meanings of house, home, household, community, and garden in British Columbia:<sup>6</sup> for example, Veronica Strong-Boag’s (1991) comparison of two suburbs, Scarborough in Ontario and Burnaby in British Columbia; Laurie Ricou’s (2002)

<sup>6</sup> Important studies of domestic space and objects, like that provided by Peter Ennals and Deryck Holdsworth (1998), Joy Parr (1999), and Peter Ward (1999), are pan-Canadian studies that include but do not focus on British Columbia.

study of “place and story”; Harris (2002); McLaren and Dyck (2002); and Liscombe (1997).<sup>7</sup>

In what ways, then, do the authors of this special issue of *BC Studies* approach and define domestic space? As the site of interdisciplinary work, domestic space is here reflected through the insights of cultural geography (Pratt), history (Raibmon), anthropology (Culhane), architecture (McKay), literary criticism (Wong), interdisciplinary studies (Wilson), and poetry (Marlatt, Zieroth, and the Office for Soft Architecture). Each scholar, however, crosses the border of his or her discipline to embrace and plunder other disciplines in order to thicken not only her/his own disciplinary discourse but also that of “borrowed” disciplines and of the subject under examination. For example, McKay and Wong incorporate historical resources, Pratt and Raibmon anthropological studies, and most of the contributors employ feminist and gender theory, analysis, and methodology. This cross-border discourse is constructive but is not without risks because disciplines do not always communicate easily with each other, and the methods of the humanities often differ from those of the social sciences. Yet how much more meaningful is our understanding of a complex and elusive topic like domestic space when we pay attention to a mix of voices and experiences and when we take intellectual risks.

As presented here, domestic space locates the material, psychological, spiritual, and social aspects of house and home and garden in the wider context of the everyday and of human relationships within and beyond the house. It shuffles between the blurry boundaries of inside and outside, and between the private and public sphere, encompassing spaces beyond traditional ideas of home, such as psychiatric institutions and the family grocery store. Important too are the interiors of domestic spaces, which shelter material objects: furniture, rooms, doors, windows, stairs, drawers, familiar everyday utensils, and mementos and articles of comfort, ease, and the past (or other places). As Emily Carr (1944, 8) slyly wrote in *The House of All Sorts*: “furniture is comical. It responds to humans. Let someone try to elude rent day ... that man the furniture torments.”

Because the house is frequently perceived as a symbol of the self or psyche, the interior of domestic spaces can be interpreted as mimicking the interior of the self and vice versa (Raibmon, this volume). Domestic space’s mimicry extends from the microcosm of self to the macrocosm

<sup>7</sup> A number of installations and art shows focused on the home have been recently mounted in Vancouver (e.g., *Pictures, Positions and Places*, Vancouver Art Gallery, September 2000 to March 2001; *Home and Away: Crossing Cultures on the Pacific Rim*, Vancouver Art Gallery, October 2003 to January 2004).

of nation and world. Thus, for example, in Pratt's discussion of the Filipino-Canadian community or in Wong's analysis of Lai's dystopic futuristic city, domestic space both mirrors *and* generates local, national, and global social practices and political ideologies.

But, as Sherry McKay (whom I paraphrase here) warns, "domestic" is an enigmatic concept. In its most common usage, the word "domestic" refers to residential buildings, houses, and housing as well as to notions associated with that elusive term "home." Noting that the adjective "domestic" means "of the home, household, or family affairs," or "of one's own country, not foreign," while the noun refers to "a household servant," she goes on to state that "the domestic and domesticity are all too readily consigned to the 'private sphere,' in opposition to the 'public sphere' and the gender asymmetries associated with that division" (McKay, this volume). Moreover, private space, like public space, is frequently subject to surveillance (video cameras), regulation (Wilson, Raibmon, McKay), and public scrutiny (Raibmon): "domestic buildings – homes – have public faces, they convey status and represent a way of life. They are 'private' yet invaded by public regulations and outsiders, as for example in the policing of the 'single family house' and the cleanliness expectations dictated by popular lifestyle magazines" (McKay, this volume).

Although grounded in the material, "domestic space is fundamentally a human space, it is differentiated and private, it is a 'bodyspace' as well as a family space" (Collignon and Staszak).<sup>8</sup> Culhane's and Wilson's attentiveness to disabled or ailing bodies, Wong's and Pratt's to labouring and migrant bodies, and Raibmon's to usurped bodies on display highlight this connection between (female) body and domestic space, with "bodyspace" as a common site for the inscription of economic, political, and cultural practices.

Observing different "sorts" and experiences of home, Pratt and Wong draw attention to the meaning of Vancouver, British Columbia, and the rest of Canada as a multicultural home. The contributors also reflect on the meaning of belonging and home for those who are denied it. In the conclusion to her discussion of domestic space as a trope for the narration of Aboriginal culture, Raibmon asks a series of pertinent questions: "Why has domestic space proven such a powerful symbol? What ... imbues domestic spaces with the power to shape judgments about inner selves? How did the fixed material forms of houses and household goods come to signify fixity of character and culture?" (Raibmon, this volume).

<sup>8</sup> Collignon and Staszak, "Preamble to the Espaces domestiques/Domestic Spaces Conference" (Paris, 17-20 September 2002).

She then wonders whether “we are more prone to naturalize the values and arrangements of domestic spaces because they are the most familiar environments we have” (Raibmon, this volume). Indeed, as Culhane so effectively demonstrates, these familiar environments – our own domestic spaces – inevitably shape how we do our research and influence its outcomes.

What follows is the opening of the back door (an image used by both Wong and Raibmon) to this house on the west side of Canada.

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