A ROOM OF MY OWN

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Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries into the twenty-first century bedrooms have been classified as spaces of expression, intimacy, and sleep. Perhaps it is due to the personal and private nature of bedrooms that they have managed to evade much scholarly attention or serious examination. For the most part, the doors to the bedroom have been kept tightly shut to the prying public eye.

The construction of western domestic spaces has undergone significant physical change over the last few hundred years, and the design and production of bedrooms, specifically children's rooms, has been no exception.[1] Perhaps, the most shocking and visually obvious transformation has been the birth of gendered rooms for children. To explore the authenticity of this observation – specifically in the case of boys' bedrooms, which have received less attention – this paper will include a case study of an eleven year-old boy as part of this examination of the relationship between gender, sex and aesthetics. How much agency does a child have in determining the layout, design and contents of his room? Whose space is it? And to what extent is it an imposed environment versus a self-constructed environment?

In the 18th century during the colonial period, children, generally considered to be undisciplined irrational creatures, were often integrated into the adult world without much consideration for their vulnerability. "Children slept wherever there was space – with parents, siblings, servants, guests; in full-sized beds or on pallets on the floor in often crowded rooms."[2] The philosophy was that the children would learn and grow up more quickly from constant association with their elders.[3]

During the Victorian era in the 19th century and earlier, spaces in the home were separated and constructed around the gender roles of adults. Women were generally confined to the back of the house, in the kitchen, drawing room or parlor; men, on the other hand, were allowed to be in the public eye, and spent most of their time in rooms located at the front of the home.[4] Children's rooms were the only space in the house that was gender neutral. Nurseries were for both genders and decorated in an unassuming fashion. They were where children slept and were cared for, keeping them out of sight and out of trouble, but also where individual identity statements blurred.[5] Distinctive children's rooms, with distinctive children's furniture, and gender-specific toys, only became common in the first decades of the twentieth century.[6] A painting by Jean-Honore Fragonard, titled *Visit to the Nursery*, 1775, depicts a nursery that is not entirely child-centric, aside from the presence of a crib (fig. 1).[7] It shows the bland colour scheme and lack of emphasis on the gender of the child, all very common for this time.

Today, middle class domestic circumstances are quite different from the nineteenth century. The modern house is becoming more gender neutral, while our children's rooms are becoming more divided. A child's capacity to have agency over his or her room is difficult to quantify, because without full independence or development the expectation that a child will have complete independence is unrealistic. It is important, however to explore how we as adults prescribe our own ideas and identities concerning gender onto our children.

The theories of psychologist Albert Bandura regarding the construction of environments from his book *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory* are useful in exploring how the physical elements of children's rooms are determined. Bandura presents three different ways in which we

construct our environmental surroundings. *Imposed Environments*, according to Bandura, are those that individuals experience whether they choose to or not. Personal characteristics exert little influence, and the individual has little control. *Selected Environments* are those that we choose to experience (e.g. peer groups), where personal characteristics are influential in an environment that is nonetheless pre-constructed. *Constructed Environments* are those that the inhabitant creates, and thus they are highly influenced by personal preference.[8] These three definitions of environment are helpful in the process of determining and exploring the impact and involvement of child and adult in the crafting of children's rooms.

The author of *Children in the House 1890-1930,* Karin Calvert, focuses on the role of the parent in choosing a decor suited to the gender of the child. She notes that by 1910 boys' rooms and girls' rooms looked very different from each other. Boys' rooms were defined by visual vocabulary borrowed from the military, as well as imagery of planes and nautical gear, all of which are still very common today. The rooms were generally sparse, with minimal use of textiles, and an emphasis on objects of knowledge consumption, i.e. desks, globes, bookshelves and maps. Girls' rooms, for the most part, were the antithesis of boys' rooms.[9]

In contrast to Calvert's research on the imposed natured of children's rooms, Elizabeth Collins Cromley, author of *A History of American Beds and Bedrooms*, discusses the many possibilities for self-expression with regard to the design of bedrooms. Nevertheless, when it comes to children's rooms, she remarks that

"Home decorating books advised parents on the proper decorations for the boys and girls of the family. A camping or an Indian theme were recommended for boys' rooms, as were pictures of ships, cowboys, and medieval knights. Every girl, practicing for her future role as hostess, liked to entertain friends, so her room needed a little tea table. Selecting her favourite wallpaper pattern and chintz curtains gave her an opportunity to express her real self."[10]

This excerpt from Crompley's text illustrates the clear objectives around designing boys' and girls' rooms to teach gender constructions at a very young age. Instructing little girls that their rooms need to emulate tea-rooms, that they can choose their curtains, but only out of a pared down selection of chintzy fabric, does not really reflect personal choice or self-expression. These spaces are without a doubt examples of Bandura's imposed environment. The examples of girls and boys rooms illustrate the stark visual divide between girls and boys (figs. 2 & 3). The room gendered 'girl' is pink and frilly with a prominent mirrored vanity. In contrast, the boys' room it decorated with a rational cityscape, blue hues and superhero iconography.

Gender, in and of itself, seems to be an inherent cultural concern. Across epochs and cultures the construction of gender appears to be consistent.[11] Yet, the way in which we perform gender, a concept coined by Judith Butler, and the way it manifests itself, seems to be very malleable and fluid. Butler describes normalized gender roles as being produced by reiterated acting, forming a static homogeneous gender identity that does not lend well to individual gender identity.[12] There are a number of different factors that contribute to the construction of cultural gender norms, many of which are often

present and influential at a very young age. The visual segregation in the design of children's bedrooms, imposed by the parent or guardian, and presented as normal by the culture, undoubtedly plays a role.

To inform this examination of boys' bedrooms, a case study of an eleven-year-old boy, Colin Sutherland, living in Peterborough Ontario with his mother and grandmother, was carried out. Colin is at a pivotal age between childhood and adolescence, between his bedroom being an imposed environment or prescribed space, and it being a self-constructed space. To explore the relationship he had with the room, and his thoughts regarding its design and contents, he took pictures of his bedroom and agreed to participate in an interview.

Colin took four photographs of his bedroom (figs. 4, 5, 6 & 7). One of the central elements for Colin was the Lego table, and his collection of more fragile possessions, located on the dresser, unfortunately they are indiscernible. For this case study Figure 4 will be the main focus. During the discussion about his room, there were a few prominent features that made little to no impression on him. The most startling example was that he could not recall the colour of his walls or what was on them, both of which receive particular attention in the discussion of gendered children's rooms, and play a prominent part in the way parents construct and perceive the design of children's spaces. The image shows that his walls are in fact white, and that currently he has almost nothing on them. When posed the question "Do you think it is a boy room?" He responded with "Yes! It has a gun in it!" This toy in his mind represented the quintessential material piece of boy culture that made the room a boy room. The gun is not visible or on display, so in his mind it was knowledge of the gun's presence that made the room a boy's room. The problem with this question is that it is difficult to extract Colin from his room when talking about it with him. Of course it is a boy's room, because it is his room and he identifies as a boy.

In general, Colin seemed disinterested in the actual design of his room. The wall-to-wall carpeting under his checkered floor rug is dark pink but he did not seem the least bit put off by this. For him, what was most exciting and important about the room was the presence of the Lego table. The defining feature of his room in his eyes was its contents – again, mostly Lego. In fact, he went so far as to say that his room was Lego themed because it contained so many Lego pieces. In contrast, as the photo illustrates it is only the toys that are Lego. His bed spread, walls and curtains, the elements that can easily be themed are, in fact, fairly neutral, although arguably, the prevent blue seen throughout the room could be considered a theme.

Much of the literature on the subject of the differing nature of girls' and boys' rooms comments on the lack of mirrors in boys' rooms, and the overabundance in girls' rooms. Colin's room fell right in line; there was not a single mirror in sight. While there is a large collage with photographs of his face (upper right hand corner of the image), according to Colin his grandmother did this and he thought little of it.

Studies have shown that as children transition into adolescent and teen years, mothers usually have more influence and involvement in boys' rooms compared to girls' rooms.[13] Colin's mother suggested that her son actually really hated his room, although he never alluded to this himself. She continued to remark that he really liked it clean although the suggestion that he clean it was scoffed at and dismissed by both mother and son. Colin's room can be seen as a healthy mixture of all three of Bandura's environments – In some cases the environment has been imposed on him, he has no say where the room is located, whether the carpet should be changed or the walls painted. His room is also a selected

environment, influenced by his peers and the media (due to circumstance his posters had been temporarily removed, however they were of the FIFA soccer star Lionel Messi and a dragon from the movie *The Prince of Persia*). It can also be analyzed as being a constructed space, constructed by his mother and grandmother, whose influence over the cleanliness of the room, the furniture and the layout seem to take precedence.

It would appear that not only does our western culture expect girls to be practicing their house-keeping skills before they have agency over the space itself, but we are also teaching them to be hyper aware of their physicality by surrounding them with mirrors and vanities. What we expect from boys is not much better. By placing them in their own fanciful war zones, whether through Lego warships or plastic guns, the concepts of war and destruction are normalized. Colin's room was in keeping with much of the literature written about the gendering of children's bedrooms. As the photo demonstrates, there are very few gender specific decorations represented in his room, and in fact without much of the content, which Colin exercises agency over, the room would be quite gender neutral with regard to our current western ideologies of what a girl or boy's room should look like. An example of this distinctive aesthetic gender divide can be seen (fig. 4), which illustrates the stereotypical imagery and colour scheme for a girl's room and a boy's room.

Today's visual and material separation of what is boy and what is girl is not finite. If history has shown us anything, the way we construct and perform gender is constantly changing. Historically it appears that gender roles have not been so overtly imposed on children; instead, as discussed earlier in this paper, children were treated as gender neutral. At an early age they were dressed in the same clothes, played with the same toys, and shared a common nursery with distinct gender roles being taught when they reached the age of six or seven. Today we are immersing children in what the majority considers to be gender normative. This is the gender that matches a child's sex, in some cases before they can even walk or talk. By doing so we are ingraining gender stereotypes. At a time when there is increasing discussion around gender equality, creating a distinct binary for children seems like a step dangerous backwards. After all, it would be much easier to learn or decide to perform gender if one was not required to unlearn one that had been implemented and shaped from birth.

FIGURES

FIG. 1

Jean-Honoré Fragonard. *The Visit to the Nursery*. Ca. 1775.

FIG. 2

Girl's room. (Image: <www.clutterfairies.com>)

FIG. 3

Boy's room. (Image: <www.tipjunkie.com/boy-room-ideas/>)

FIG. 4

Colin's bedroom. (Image: Colin Sutherland, 14 Nov. 2010)

FIG. 5

Colin's bedroom. (Image: Colin Sutherland, 14 Nov. 2010)

FIG. 6

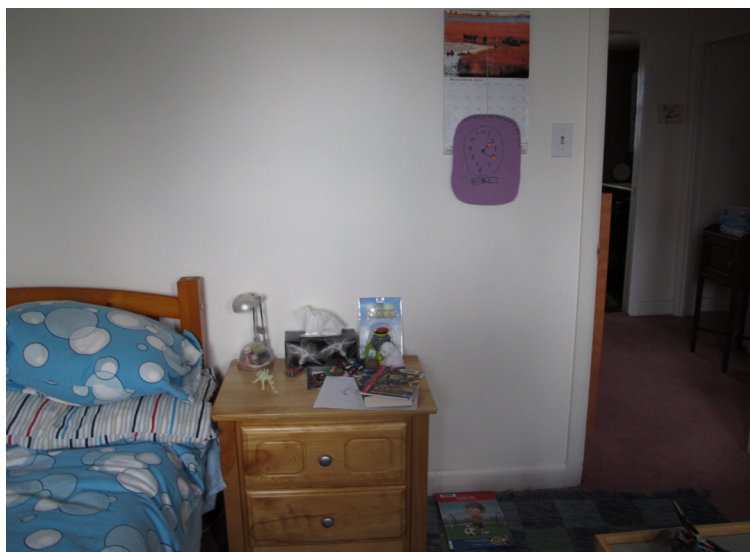Colin's bedroom. (Image: Colin Sutherland, 14 Nov. 2010)

FIG. 7

Colin's bedroom. (Image: Colin Sutherland, 14 Nov. 2010)

ENDNOTES

[1] Sally McMurry, *Families and Farmhouses In Nineteenth-Century America: Vernacular Design and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

[2] Karin Cavlery, "Children in the House, 1890-1930," *American Home Life, 1880-1930* ed. Jessica H Foy and Thomas J. Schlereth (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992) 76.

[3] In the chapter "Children in the House 1890-1930," in *American Home Life, 1890-1930,* Karin Calvert explains that childhood was considered to be a "a frustrating period of human inadequacy" and that they "therefore believed that children should work, play, eat, and sleep in the company of adults in order to learn from them and grow up quickly."

[4] Lynne Walker, "Home Making: An Architectural Perspective," *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 27:3 (2002): 826.

[5] Elizabeth Collins Cromley, "A History of American Beds and Bedrooms," *Perspective in Vernacular Architecture* 4 (1991): 182.

[6] Irene Cieraad, "Gender at Play: Décor Differences Between Boys' and Girls' Bedrooms," *Gender and Consumption: Domestic Cultures ad the Commercialisation of Everyday Life* ed. Emma Casey and Lydia Martens (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007) 199.

[7] Calvert states, "Virtually all of the furnishings of a typical Victorian nursery would have been secondhand adult-sized goods that the family had accumulated over time, with only the cribs and perhaps one of more child-sized chairs."

[8] Albert Bandura, *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory* (New Jersey: Stanford University, 1986). These terms and their relationship to the gendering of children's bedroom are further examined in the study by Jones, Randell M., Denis E. Taylor, Andrew J. Dick, Archana Singh, and Jerry L. Cook, "Bedroom Design and Decoration: Gender Differences in Preference and Activity," *Adolescence* 42:167 (Fall 2007): 539-553.

[9] Calvert, 87.

[10] Cromley, 129.

[11] Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Myths of Gender: Biological Theories About Women and Men* (New York: BasicBooks, 1985).

[12] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

[13] Randell M. Jones, Denis E. Taylor, Andrew J. Dick, Archana Singh, and Jerry L. Cook, "Bedroom Design and Decoration: Gender Differences in Preference and Activity," *Adolescence* 42: 167 (Fall 2007): 539-553.

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