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«As Malouf's recollections mingle with mine, I have started to notice that silences in his text have leapt from the page, affecting Brisbane architecture beyond this one house on Edmondstone Street.»

MALOUF'S «WORLD
OF SILENCE», OR QUEERING
THE UNDERCROFT
Hamish Lonergan

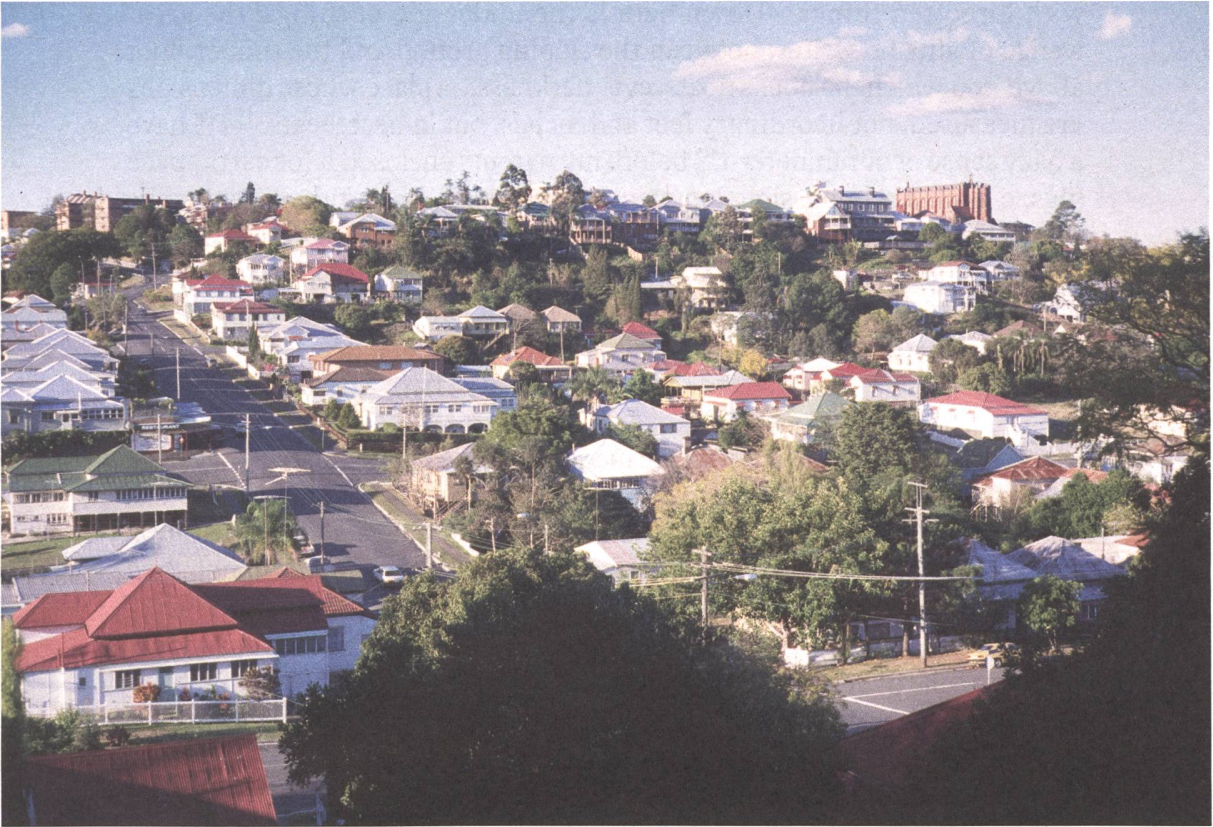
Hamish Lonergan is an architectural designer and researcher, pursuing a doctoral thesis at the Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture (gta), ETH Zurich. His research uses methods informed by queer theory to investigate the philosophical concept of tacit knowledge in design studio education since the 1970s. His writing — broadly concerned with the entanglement of architecture, philosophy, pedagogy, and queerness — appears in publications including OASE, Interstices, gta papers, Footprint and Cartha.

Brisbane is «a one-storeyed weatherboard town,» (1) wrote the Australian poet and novelist David Malouf about his home town: my home town. Its detached timber houses — we call them Queenslanders — perch on the hills, or hover above flood level on the flats, on «low stilts at the front, high stilts at the back...a nest of open rooms surrounded on three sides by wide, cooling verandahs...and the roof...that full ox-blood colour that is peculiar to Brisbane that it seems more dominant even, in the long view, than the green of the enormous shade trees.» (2) (fig. a) We are deep in Malouf's memory here, in his essay-memoir «12 Edmondstone Street», growing up in the 1930s in a once-gracious, then faded, Queensland south of the river. We read it so often in architecture school in Brisbane that sometimes I have trouble separating Malouf's house from my own childhood in a Queensland. I can almost hear «the creak of timber as the day's heat seeps away, the gradual adjustment in all its parts, like a giant instrument being tuned.» (3) But there are other stories here too, barely heard over the creaking timbers. As Malouf's recollections mingle with mine, I have started to notice that silences in his text have leapt from the page, affecting Brisbane architecture beyond this one house on Edmondstone Street.

Rereading Malouf for the umpteenth time in Zurich — in an apartment where windows and doors close with the thunk of an expensive car boot — I imagine a breeze stirring the hairs up my arm. It drifts, as Malouf remembers, «from room to room through a maze of interconnecting spaces; every breath can be heard, every creak of a bed-post or spring...A training in perception has as much to do with what is ignored and passed over as with what is observed.» (4) These habits overlay the places I have lived ever since. In my concrete bedroom in Zurich, with a Grindr hookup, I am still half-straining for squeaking floorboards at the other end of the house: the vibrations that tell me when my parents are home and any privacy gone with them.

Queenslanders were built single-skinned, balloon-framed, and often all that separates interior from exterior is a plank of tongue-and-grooved hardwood and the shade of the verandah (fig. b). Outside seeps between gaps in the floorboards, or through a window frame swollen ajar in the humidity. Once, a possum that lived in our roof fell through a light-fitting in the ceiling during the night, spraying the kitchen in panic; in the morning we found it asleep in the fruit basket. Malouf saw «something theatrical» in Brisbane's stone public buildings, which he thought too grand for the suburban straggle of timber dwellings, having «something of the stage-set...a proper scene for action...[with] a grandeur and confidence of gesture that might push a man towards illustrious performance.» (5) I have always thought the same of Brisbane's domestic interiors, where the more prosaic performances of life play out against walls so thin they resemble scenography. Only, in the house, the performance is forever being interrupted: nature breaking the fourth wall.

Malouf's home was full of these fuzzy boundaries, and they are fuzziest in the undercroft: a «world of silence» beneath the house. (6) A labyrinth of iron-capped timber stumps, the soil filthy underfoot with soot and strewn



(fig. a) Queenslanders in Paddington, Brisbane.
Image: Iraphne R. Childs, ca. 1989



(fig. b) Lunch on the Verandah. Image: unknown photographer.
State Library of Queensland, negative number: 164035

with forgotten things. «Down here is the underside of things: the great wedge of air,» he writes, between the sloping ground and the timber floor above, «on which the house floats, ever darkness...a place whose dimensions are measured, not in ordinary feet and inches, but in heartbeats.» (7) I have a hazy sense of our undercroft, before my parents enclosed it for extra space (figs. c & d). An impossibly long run of stairs opening off the kitchen like a portal into the darkness below. The powdery ground pock-marked with the inverted cones of antlion traps, stippled with the wriggling paths of skinks. Surveying this landscape with a boy from school, we lean in close to the desiccated exoskeleton left by a cicada, where entomological thrill mingles with a discovery of a different kind: the frisson of bare legs brushing.

«Real cities, as everyone knows, are made to last,» Malouf muses, «they have foundations set firm in the earth. Weatherboard cities float above it on blocks or stumps.» (8) He left for London almost as soon as he could, in the 1960s. Maybe it is easier to leave a city without foundations. Malouf, though, had more reasons to leave than most: a gay man escaping the claustrophobia of a society obsessed with policing bodies and pleasure, where he remembers police regularly entrapping gays in public toilets. (9) I left too, came back, stayed to study architecture, then left again. Maybe some of us are like those «weather-board houses» Malouf describes, that «can be lifted if necessary, loaded on to the back of a lorry and set down again two suburbs or a thousand miles away.» (10) Still, something draws me back, as it drew Malouf back. «First houses are the grounds of our first experience,» he writes. «Crawling about at floor level, room by room, we discover laws that we will apply later to the world at large...in the particular relationship of living-rooms to attic and cellar (or in my case under-the-house).» (11)

My architecture teachers at the University of Queensland (UQ) read these lines as an antipodean echo of European phenomenology. Architects Brit Andresen and Peter O’Gorman wrote that, in Malouf’s work, «the verandah and — the undercroft — like [Baston] Bachelard’s cellar and attic — carry a psychic power. Places raised above the ground...have association with the sky and the superego...in-ground foundations are associated with the earth below and the id.» (12) Even people who did not grow up in a Queensland recognise these experiences, they argued, because they evoke a universal experience of human dwelling, poised between earth and sky, shelter and exposure. Since then, Malouf’s writing has influenced generations of Brisbane architects and critics, who regularly liken the ground floor of new homes — where parents watch children playing from well-appointed kitchens, dirt replaced with polished concrete or floorboards under bare feet — to Malouf’s undercroft. (13) As the critic Cameron Bruhn notes, the popularity of Malouf’s evocative writing has, itself, helped sustain this «collective unconscious» under the house. (14)

It is true that anyone might recognise qualities of Edmondstone Street, but these experiences of the undercroft were specific and personal, not only collective. Malouf himself seems to push back against such universalism in

his essay «A First Place», where he suggested that «we have tended, when thinking as «Australians», to turn away from difference.» Malouf is careful to acknowledge that these differences can be made intelligible — «it is a writer's job... to make insiders of all of us» — and that some differences might relate to a shared «Brisbane way of experiencing things,» but his writing abounds with finer-grained accounts of otherness. (15) The earth of the undercroft is the only place where, according to Malouf, traces of Aboriginal Australia persist on the land claimed by these houses (16): colonial imports adapted from other parts of the British Empire. And there is the silence of his father, repairing things in a tool shed under the house, whose devoutly Christian parents spoke only Arabic and hailed from Lebanon — not always welcome in South Brisbane — who so completely subsumed the cliché of stoic Australian masculinity, who did not know how to speak to a son so full of «extravagance, high-strung fantasies.» (17)

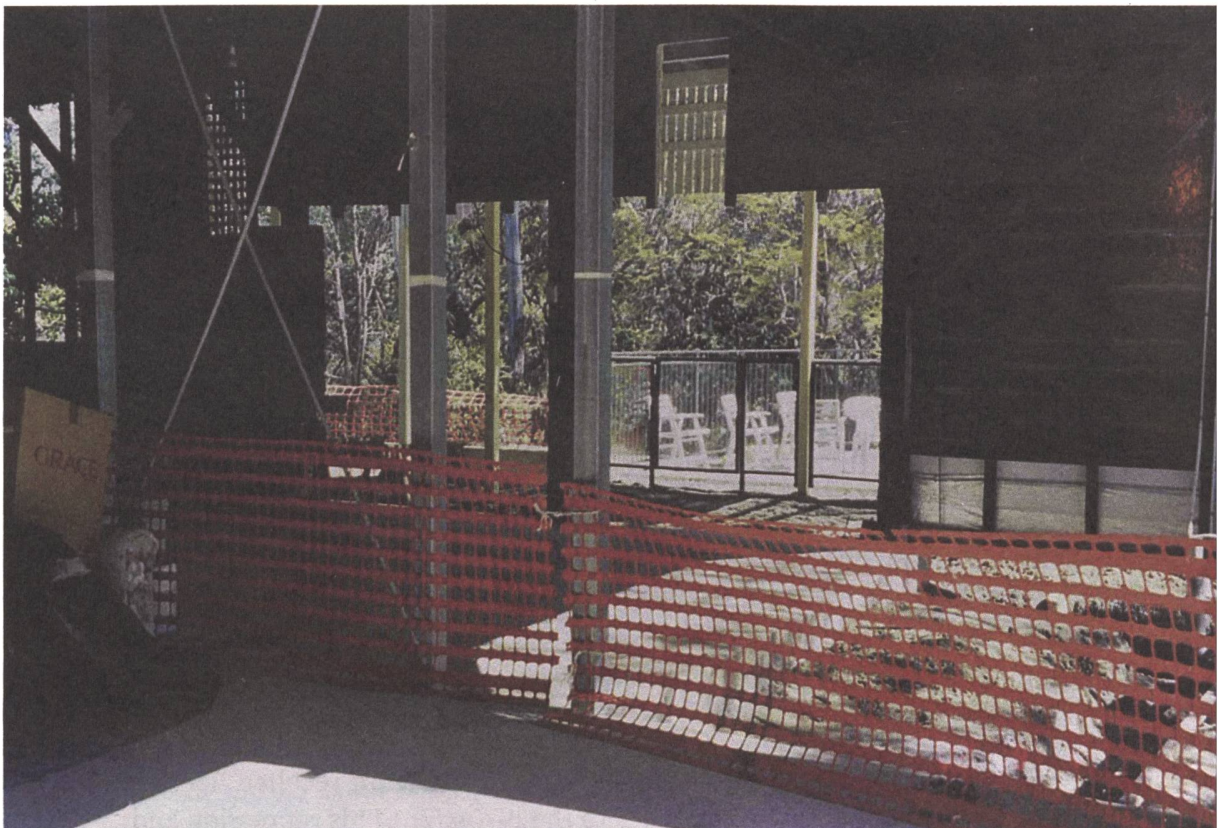
Malouf, put less euphemistically, was a gay kid, and it seems pretty clear to me — and to queer friends when we discuss Malouf, and to several queer theorists (18) — that Malouf's undercroft could be a very queer space indeed. It was where, Malouf writes, «bodies, with no awareness of space or time, expand, contract, float, lapse into dreaming... that the underdark outside matches now, but perfectly, the dark within.» (19) Down here, I imagine, the kind of forbidden thoughts that crept into his mind at night in bed could be matched in the world outside. It is bodily and primal, for «exploring, testing ourselves against the darkness down there, pushing ourselves to the limits of our young courage to outrageous dares.» (20) It is where I remember my first, imprecise flickers of gay desire, squatting in the dirt.

Malouf has been coy about these dares in the dark. Despite his call to recognise difference, he has always been reluctant to discuss the difference sexual orientation made in his life or work. He is more interested, he maintains, in the way that writing «transmutes» biography, including its sexual dimensions, into feelings and sentiment. (21) It is only in the «A First Place» that he explicitly names the carnality there all along, half-hidden in the undercroft: «there can be few Brisbane children who do not associate under-the-house, guiltily or as a great break-out of themselves, with their first touch or taste of sex.» (22)

That queerness otherwise seemed invisible to my UQ teacher, or at least uncommented on, is not altogether surprising either. When Malouf published Edmondstone Street, his readers did not know he was gay, (23) and Queensland was still dominated by the deeply conservative premier Joh Bjelke-Peterson. His government actively prosecuted «sodomy» and sanctioned police violence towards queers; attempted to criminalise lesbianism for the first time and prohibit the sale of alcohol to gays. In the face of the AIDS crisis, in 1984 Bjelke-Peterson called gay men «insulting evil animals... you can't get any beast or animal that is so depraved to carry on the way they do.» (24) There are few accounts of being queer in the UQ architecture school at the time, though the architect Margaret Ward recalled her gay friends there hiding their sexuality into the 1970s. (25) This repression and



(fig. c) The undercroft of my childhood home under renovation.
Image: author's collection, ca. 2000



(fig. d) The undercroft of my childhood home under renovation.
Image: author's collection, ca. 2000

violence entangles the innocent queer stirrings of the undercroft with state brutality and a murderous HIV policy.

Yet, queerness persisted down here; the undercroft is both metaphorically and practically queer. Though it technically occupies the same footprint as the house, the slanting terrain — with all that dirt, full of crawly things — makes it impossible to dwell as a family does above. In her account of queering of phenomenology, Sara Ahmed suggests we might embrace these oblique lines — like the ground of the undercroft — which disorientate what is normally upright and straight, just as queer lives naturally unsettle the expected. (26) In this sense, part of the reason why so many people who grew up in Queenslanders remember playing in the undercroft might be because it queered — in the sense of becoming unfamiliar — daily life for any child, making it memorable, irrespective of whether they were queer themselves. They could play noisier, dirtier, rougher, closer, more bodily, out of sight on the slanted ground.

And because it cannot be used in the same way, and because this uncanny double still harbours some of the protections of the house above — out of public view and police control, away from familial eyes — there is a different kind of intimacy and eroticism down here. As Ahmed reminds us, thinking about a queer phenomenology should retain a commitment to things both queer in the sense of oblique and to the immediate eroticism of sexual practices which are not straight. (27) It is queer because the sex Malouf might have had here — gay sex — evaded the control he felt everywhere else in Brisbane.

I remember the jolt of queer kinship I felt, reading Ahmed for the first time, because she so precisely articulated what I had always found uncomfortable about the phenomenology I was taught. In first year at UQ, we read passages by Christian Norberg-Schulz, the Norwegian theorist of architectural phenomenology: «Man dwells when he can orientate himself within and identify himself with an environment...the genius loci, or «spirit of the place»» (28) My teachers thought that part of Brisbane's spirit was bound up in the spatial experiences of the Queenslanders. This kind of phenomenological orientation might have been subjective and individual — the memories we have of the undercroft — but there was an expectation that we would ultimately orientate ourselves in the same way, to something communal. Ahmed shows us what it means to orientate differently: to continue to experience the ground as oblique, rather than re-orientating ourselves; to stay with discomfort and difference.

I do not think they misread Edmondstone Street. After all, Malouf has never corrected these architectural-phenomenological readings of his work, even when given the opportunity on stages shared with panels of architects. (29) Only that the silence of the undercroft has encouraged architects in Brisbane to design in some ways instead of others. As the architectural critic, and sometime queer theorist, Naomi Stead wrote in a review of one Queenslanders renovation: «the traditional underhouse, like many of the spaces Malouf describes, is close to being a thing of the past. Which is a shame: it had qualities that

were really special...being screened from yet connected to the world.» (30)
Building in a rumpus room below the house allows one experience of living only by closing off another.

The same blurriness of a Queenslander's boundaries that fascinated Andresen, O'Gorman and Malouf alike destabilised the traditions of home, with its family structures and divisions: of interior/exterior, public/private, human/animal, nature/culture, visible/invisible. There is something deeply queer, in this disorienting sense, about coinhabiting with a possum in the roof and lizards in the undercroft (31); that, enveloping the safety of the interior, there lurked spaces where desires manifested which, even twenty years ago, when I was a child, were still difficult to imagine above. It is unsettling to think of orderly single-family homes constructed on the shifting grounds of such unruly wildness — over the top of these queer silences — without their owners' even knowing it.