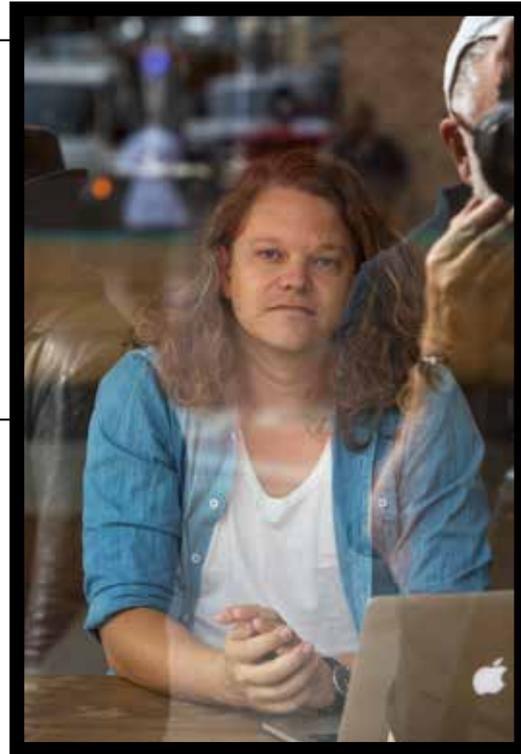


room to grow

Jonathan Cane ruminates on the evolution of the home to accommodate non-normative families

PHOTOGRAPH JAC DE VILLIERS



Stop decorating your children's bedrooms in pink and blue. Just stop it. As a queer child who grew up in a green bedroom – and an otherwise conventional family – my green space, like living in the shadow of tall trees, was among the very few safe spaces I knew. As a little kid I dreamt, one day, of living in a brightly lit open-plan loft in SoHo. How I even knew that those exposed brick, semi-industrial lofts with giant arch windows and herringbone oak floors existed is unclear, but the fact that they did offered hope to a boy living in a three-bedroom, two-and-a-half bathroom mid-century suburban house.

Before you start feeling very sorry for me (growing up without my own loft), think about how domestic workers, very often described as 'part of the family', lived during apartheid and even now. The tiny 'maid's' room made family life, except as part of the 'master's' family, impossible. Scattered across the country, their real children, parents, husbands, brothers and sisters most likely lived in the mean-spirited, ungenerous and malevolent 'matchbox' houses. Designed by architect Douglas Calderwood, the 'NE 51/6' (Non-European 1951 Version 6) houses, commonly known as matchboxes, were explicitly designed for heterosexual nuclear

with shared kitchens. In 1920s Germany, feminist Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky designed the famous 'Frankfurt Kitchen', which was scientifically planned to make domestic tasks more efficient, freeing women from onerous domestic duty. By the 1990s the open-plan kitchen made Schütte-Lihotzky's revolutionary design seem old-fashioned. Instead, 'modern' families now wanted the idea of the 'Tuscan kitchen'. The reality was that Mom was still in the kitchen (even if it was now after a long day at the office and even if Dad did cook occasionally) – so, as the thinking went, let's knock

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families. Calderwood and his colleagues, however well-meaning they may have been, set a pattern of building shitty little houses that was replicated all over South Africa – even after apartheid, under the RDP. That many, many people made these houses into beautiful, imaginative and safe homes, in spite of everything and against the racist intentions of the government that had made them live there, is both remarkable and inspiring.

Surely, however, making the best of the shitty houses that we have inherited can't be the best we can hope for? Why, when it is patently obvious that families no longer (or never really did) approximate the Victorian ideal, do our homes still look profoundly similar to each other and to some middle-class nightmare that never really existed?

After the Bolshevik Revolution, Lenin published *Down with the Private Kitchen*, which promoted the liberation of women by reconceptualising the act of eating as a communal affair best done out of the home, at a *stolovaya* or government-run cafeteria. Later, Stalin shifted the design agenda to communal apartments

down the walls so at least we can see her cooking. One day we will look back at the open-plan kitchen with a certain kind of horror and nostalgia. For now, however, we are fortunate that architects such as 2016 Pritzker Prize winner Alejandro Aravena are building imaginative social housing that is open-ended and allows real people to participate in building homes for real families.

The hard questions that were asked in the 20th century about a woman's place in the home will now need to be asked about non-heterosexual and **gender-nonconforming** families, and the kinds of places queer people want to make. On the whole, LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex) people have done their best with the profoundly conservative structures they have inherited; however, new spaces that aren't necessarily centred on procreation, parenting, monogamy and strict gender roles are needed.

While we work out what kinds of spaces will help LGBTI people flourish, perhaps the best we can do is at least not make them – **or anyone, for that matter** – grow up in pink or blue bedrooms. ☐