Set Wide the Window

Olivia Tristan Ramo

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“Set Wide the Window”

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
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Set Wide the Window\textsuperscript{1}

\textsuperscript{1} Title borrowed from the first line of Edith Wharton’s “Vesalius in Zante. (1564)”, which begins “SET wide the window. Let me drink the day.”, in \textit{North American Review}, vol. 175, (November 1902), 625.
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Windows in a building are the most interesting things in America.²

Gertrude Stein

² Gertrude Stein, Everybody's Autobiography, (Exact Change, 199), 188.
I. Let There Be Light

More light, more light!

Open the window so that more light may come in.

last words of Goethe
The Dark Entity

The windows of the small apartment my father and I shared during my adolescence all faced the gray wall of the building next door. The lack of daylight and views made the rooms feel even smaller and placed us in near total isolation. I remember the potent spectrum of gray that spread through the Manhattan apartment when we lost power during Hurricane Sandy, how it made the space feel like a cage. In these shadows my anxiety reigned; I had no means to attach myself to the outside in moments of suffering, and so I sunk deeper into my interior. My mother’s ground-floor apartment was much bigger, but still lacked windows with any views, save for French doors in the living room through which we could access a wonderful, albeit tiny, garden tucked between our building and the next. The entry of sunlight into the apartment was only possible here through these glass doors, though the view outside was still, in a way, part of our interior. The apartment was situated firmly in the private realm, with little visual access to the larger world in motion outside. When my mother first bought the apartment in the mid-1990s, its windows had not yet been blocked by the condominium building which later sprung up next door. But by the time I arrived, the windows in our kitchen, bathroom, and my mother’s bedroom all faced brick walls.

My bedroom was in the basement and had two windows that beheld views of the dug-out area beneath the garden porch and a corner where two of the building’s walls met at the ground. At night I struggled to fall asleep, imagining monsters hiding in the room’s deep shadows and behind the windows; I had to sleep with the light on. I occupied the building’s cellar floor, which Gaston Bachelard describes in *The Poetics of Space*, as “the dark entity of the house, the one that partakes of subterranean forces. When we dream there, we are in harmony with the irrationality of
the depths.”3 My experience of my childhood bedroom, which was the “dark entity” of the entire six-story building we shared with others, concurs with Bachelard’s description. The fact that I was inhabiting the depths of an entire building only intensified my experience within the “cellar”; I was beneath the realm of the living, a space characterized by unmitigated darkness. I always had this feeling of being watched, despite my windows’ inaccessibility to the outside. I was never able to know for certain if there was someone behind the glass, hiding somewhere in the dark crevices. During the day, gray light pierced through the porch wood, faintly illuminating the dust and dirt that had gathered beneath. A bookshelf was built at some point in the deep sill of the other window, and a curtain was placed in front of it, rendering it near-impenetrable by light. And here too I was prone to sinking. I struggled to get out of bed without the persistence of morning light; a day could go by and I wouldn’t notice the sun had set until I ventured upstairs.

When I was young, I requested that the individual walls of my room be painted yellow, orange, purple, and pink. I wanted to be immersed in the saturated hues of a dollhouse. I came home from my father’s house one night to find that in my absence my mother had painted the entirety of my bedroom a bright magenta. The pink walls were a reflection of an effort to assert control over my bedroom in the absence of adequate windows. I pinned things to the walls that signaled whichever aesthetic phase I was in at different points of my life. The walls were eventually painted over in light blue (when magenta came to seem too childish once I was on the precipice of adolescence) and then pale pink (after I decided I wanted my life to feel like a Sofia Coppola film during my teenage years). I filled my bedroom with candles, hung lacy white undergarments on the furniture and string lights on the walls. In lieu of natural light, I sought out alternative means of illumination, through decorating it with things I felt reflected the place I was

in at the time. Eventually, I replaced childhood drawings with concert tickets, magazine cutouts, and posters of skateboarders. If the outside was physically inaccessible to me, my decor had to at least represent evidence of it. All of this careful curation was to personalize a dark interior that inevitably appeared the same, no matter what covered the walls, once the lights went out.

I remember too how it felt to wake up and find that snow had fallen while I’d slept and how magical our garden looked, blanketed completely in white. Or how serene my mother looked drinking coffee and painting her nails at the garden table, basked in summer rays. I must be careful here and acknowledge that it was, window situation aside, a beautiful apartment, and I was lucky to grow up there. But it was hard to live in a place in which interiority could be felt so intensely, especially for someone struggling to ground themselves in exterior reality. To put it lightly, it was dark. I went to sleep in darkness, I woke up in it. I never had the privilege, as I do right now, to stare out a window and connect momentarily with the goings-on of the outside. And yes, it is a privilege. To exist simultaneously inside and out, to know the weather upon waking, to observe strangers, to watch a sunrise throw streaks of light across the sleeping body of one that you love.

My first experience living in a place where light could enter unobstructed was at my ex-boyfriend’s childhood apartment on the Upper West Side. It was wrapped on all sides by large windows, and situated on the top floor of a high-rise building. It was then that I fully realized the impact my initial architectural misfortune had had on me. Light was something we could control. When it was blinding, we closed the blinds to let in just enough light to illuminate the inside without exposing us completely to it. I was in awe of how expansive windows could make a space feel, and though it wasn’t my first time in an apartment like this, it was the first time I felt completely at home in one. I know it was golden hour when my boyfriend told me he loved me for the first time because I remember the way orange light pierced his bedroom blinds and covered
the room in stripes. I felt like I had finally found light, or rather, that it had found me, and I wanted to bask in it for as long as I possibly could.

My ex-boyfriend’s mother, Kyoko, at the window, Spring 2020
The “Struggle for Light”

An oft-misquoted line from the French Modernist architect Le Corbusier goes, “The history of architecture is the history of the struggle for light.”\(^4\) Understanding the history and development of architecture as an ongoing effort to conquer light, rather than to master space, beckons us to consider light as a resource of paramount importance to human life. The “struggle” that Corbusier identifies in his claim is between the two conflicting functions of the wall and window, one whose intention is to support the house, the other which contradicts the wall’s solidity in its efforts to allow light to penetrate the structure.\(^5\) The history of architecture, in Corbusier’s view, is therefore a centuries-long negotiation of these two functions, resulting from an inherent understanding of light as something both fundamental and imperative to our lived experience. In a world where one must venture far from modern life to find a completely dark place, the benefits of light are often taken for granted. Corbusier’s statement engenders a deeper consideration of light and the extent to which our contact with it has contributed to architectural development. To fully conceptualize its significance, we must examine the spiritual, metaphysical, and cultural meanings attributed to light through a historical lens. We will investigate the window through these contexts, and the extent to which it developed in direct response to the “struggle for light” identified by Corbusier.

Light has been a necessity of life since the beginning of time. There is a reason why it has become a metaphor for hope and goodness, for truth, and for God and heaven. It is the very thing that has made all human progress possible. Though every species on Earth relies on sunlight, human beings are unique in the way we have actively manipulated it and imbued it with immense

\(^4\) The actual quote, from his treatise *Glass, the Fundamental Material of Modern Architecture*, is “The history of architecture in temperate regions is, we can say, the story of the conquest of light”, and certainly lacks some of the gravitas of the aforementioned inaccurate one.

cultural significance. “We only know the world as it is evoked through light,” wrote the architect Louis Kahn. Without it, the affirmation of reality is not possible, nor is the acquisition of knowledge. Darkness is the realm in which disquietude triumphs, as I learned in my daylight-less childhood bedrooms.

The history of the window, that is, an opening in a wall built to admit light and air, coincides with the development of permanent shelters. The earliest nomadic humans, who migrated from eastern and southern Africa into central Asia and Europe some 80,000 years ago, sought shelter in caves or in temporary structures which could be easily constructed and dismantled. Light was a secondary consideration in prehistoric housing, as early humans spent the majority of daylight hours outdoors. It was in the Neolithic period, when the climate warmed considerably and farming became possible, that more permanent structures were built and civilization was born in the modern-day Middle East. Ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian houses were constructed with bricks made of mud or clay, due to both the limited access to stone and timber and that mud kept homes cool in the blazing desert heat. Windows were often small and placed just below ceilings, ensuring the privacy of a home’s inhabitants, the entry of light into rooms during the day, and the escape of hot air. This architecture is depicted in an illustration of the house of Nakht in the Book of the Dead from the 18th Dynasty. Representations of windows

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12 (“papyrus”, n.d.)
in early Egyptian wall paintings suggest these openings were covered with matting, while Assyrian reliefs depict wide windows subdivided by colonettes.\(^{13}\)

In the thousands of years preceding the invention of electricity, windows were imperative for illuminating interior spaces. Artificial lighting was both a costly and cumbersome resource. 4,000 years ago, in Babylonia, a worker’s day wages would buy just enough oil to light a room for ten minutes.\(^{14}\) The lack of artificial illumination meant the world after sunset was blanketed in darkness. The night was both a dangerous and unproductive time. Light would not become widely accessible until around 1850, with the invention of kerosene lamps which burned brighter and more efficiently than previous methods. A day of labor could get now one five hours of light. Streetlights allowed people in cities to venture out at night, with a lessened fear of darkness. When Thomas Edison turned on the first power plant and illuminated a part of New York City on September 4th, 1882, it signaled a kind of end to the foreboding darkness that humans had faced for thousands of years.\(^{15}\) One might expect that windows would become less important features of architecture with the development of artificial light, however, the opposite has occurred. Windows have become the predominant feature of Modern architecture. Our taste for daylight in our homes has only increased throughout the glass window’s history, and architectural design has developed in response to it. Le Corbusier writes in “Glass: The Fundamental Material of Modern Architecture” that “glass will be a characteristic feature of building in the new machine age because it is the most direct means by which we can find one of the essential conditions for life:


\(^{14}\) All Things Considered, “The History Of Light, In 6 Minutes And 47 Seconds,” presented by David Kestenbaum and Jane Brox, aired May 2, 2014, on NPR. https://www.npr.org/2014/05/02/309040279/in-4-000-years-one-thing-hasnt-changed-it-takes-time-to-buy-light

\(^{15}\) “The History Of Light, In 6 Minutes And 47 Seconds.”
sun and light.” His statement has been proven true in cities in particular, where new buildings appear to be made entirely of glass, epitomized by the skyscraper. Our relationship to light has been strengthened by its spiritual, biological, and philosophical associations, and our architecture reflects this. Corbusier is referring to glass windows in particular in his claim, perhaps the most crucial invention in our conquest of natural light.

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16 Corbusier, “Glass”, 292.
The Age of Glass

The history of the glass window begins of course with the invention of glass. In *Natural History*, the Roman philosopher Pliny the Elder (23-79 CE) recounts a fable of glass’ discovery. In the ancient Syrian region of Phoenicia, a merchant ship transporting potassium nitrate docked along the shores of the Belus River. The merchants, unable to secure stones, used blocks of nitrate from their cargo to support their cauldrons atop fires. A reaction between the fire, nitrate, and sand occurred, and the merchants “beheld transparent streams flowing forth of a liquid hitherto unknown: this, it is said, was the origin of glass.”¹⁷ This tale has been debunked, for it is near-impossible for an open-wood fire to reach temperatures high enough to fuse nitrate and sand and produce glass as a result. There is also substantial archeological evidence of glass’ existence long before the Phoenician trade in the Mediterranean. Nonetheless, Pliny’s account of its discovery demonstrates the fascination that glass has inspired in humans throughout its history. There is a magical quality to glass that Pliny’s story captures in his description of the merchants watching “transparent streams” crystalize before their eyes; it was a supernatural image to behold at a time when no other material could compare in translucency.

The glass window represents a marriage between the illuminative properties of an opening and the protective function of the wall. The first civilization to identify the fenestral possibilities of glass was Imperial Rome, where the first glass window panes were invented for use in bathhouses. Glassblowing, which had been developed in the early first century in the Syro-Palestinian region, arrived in Rome following the Roman conquest of the area in 64 B.C..¹⁸ This

technique for glass production, along with casting, would be used to make the first glass window panes. First functioning primarily for insulation, transparency or evenness was not considered a priority in their production, and thus early panes were thick and semi-opaque in nature. These windows faced the South to maximize the influx of daylight, particularly from the afternoon until sunset, when they received the most visitors. Seneca, writing in the first century AD, remarked that,

Nowadays…people regard baths as fit only for moths if they have not been so arranged that they receive the sun all day long through the widest of windows, if men cannot bathe and get a coat of tan at the same time, and if they cannot look out from their bathtubs over stretches of land and sea.

Imbued in Seneca’s observation is a kind of acrimony towards the new standards Romans held for public baths following the introduction of these window panes. He is nostalgic for the dimmer baths of yore, and, as is common when any architectural shift occurs in a culture, laments this new style. He is also critical of a newly developed Roman taste for sunlight, which had become not only a source of heat but a symbol of prestige. “Romans from this period and after sought as much light as possible in baths, a desire Seneca decried as a sign of decadence,” writes historian Daniel Jütte in *Transparency*. The Roman poet Statius, describing the bath of a ‘wealthy contemporary’, wrote in 90 CE, “Daylight everywhere abounds as the unconscionable sun penetrates the roof with all his rays, and is burned by a different heat.” Statius’ description is in an almost-mocking tone; he views the amount of light as excessive and is disapproving of this

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19 Trentinella, “Roman Glass”
23 Ibid., 42.
particular display of wealth. The “different heat” is the effect of unmediated solar energy, and notably, he is not warmed by it but “burned.” Light as a primary function of the glass window in Imperial Rome is reflected in the etymological link between windows and light. The window became synonymous with light during this period, demonstrated by evidence that plural forms of the Latin *lumen*, meaning light, *lumina*, and *luminaria* were used to refer to windows along with *fenestra*. This growing association between windows and light signifies the extent to which the influx of light became its most sought-after function and proves that if not transparent enough to provide a significant view, early Roman window panes could still allow ample amounts of light to enter a room.

Still, in most Imperial Roman homes, the use of window glass was sparing due to the high cost and rarity of the minerals needed to produce panes. The use of glass as a sealant was therefore restricted to the wealthiest. Stretched animal skin and cloth were far more common as window coverings, which allowed diffuse light to enter spaces. Architects also employed shutters for unsealed windows, which consisted of intricate latticework or simple designs, such as two solid leaves. These allowed the entry of soft light into an interior, while still offering protection from inclement weather and ensuring privacy. Roman legislation reflected the importance placed on daylight and windows more generally during this period. Property laws, or *servitudes*, protected a homeowner’s right to a supply of daylight into their home under *ne luminibus*, thereby preventing neighbors from constructing buildings that would block or minimize the influx of light into another

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25 Ibid., 40.
26 Jütte, *Transparency*, 41
27 Included in these servitudes were *ius lumnium*, the right to be able a window to admit air, and *ne prospectui officiatur*, the right to an unobstructed view. These two functions protected under Imperial Roman law will be explored in depth in the following sections, however we will continue to focus on *ne luminibus* for its relevance to our relationship to light.
structure. Similar legislation has been enacted in countries that follow the Roman example. The English property law of “Ancient Lights”, originating in 1663, echoes the Roman servitude, stipulating that while individuals and buildings do not necessarily have a right to light, neighbors cannot construct structures that obstruct the entry of daylight into another’s home. Contemporary examples of this legislation exist, such as a regulation in the New York City Administrative Code, which stipulates that “Every required window shall be so located as to light properly all portions of the room.” However, enforcement of this law is not a priority, or our qualifications for adequate daylight have changed, as demonstrated by my childhood windows being blocked by neighboring high-rise buildings. These laws are, nonetheless, concrete evidence of a historical and legislative understanding of daylight as imperative to human life.

Despite the taste for sunlight that developed in Imperial Rome, Daniel Jutte notes that windows were “neither an indispensable architectural material nor one that necessarily enhanced the building from an aesthetic point of view. Where windows were glazed in the Roman World, this was done primarily out of practical considerations.” Such practical considerations included insulation (which was specifically achieved by the invention of the glass window) and illumination. Following the fall of the Roman Empire, the use of glazed windows declined. Through trade and conquest, Romans spread glass-making techniques throughout Italy, France, Germany, and China. The re-emergence of glass windows would occur with the rise of Christianity

\[ \text{ perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0063%3Aalphabetic+letter%3DS%3Aentry+group%3D2%3Aentry%3Dservitutes-cn } \]
\[ \text{ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7dac39ed915d2acb6ed74c44872_HC_796_Law_Commission_356_WEB.pdf, p. 1-2 } \]
\[ \text{ “Article 1 - LIGHTING AND VENTILATION — NYC Administrative Code 0.0.1 documentation”, n.d. } \]
\[ \text{ Jütte, Transparency, 49-50. } \]
when Church leaders realized the extent to which light in a church interior could enhance spiritual experience and understanding.

... 

The association between light and the divine can be traced back to the earliest religions and is reflected in their architecture. Spiritual buildings were designed with great attention to facilitating the entry of light, so as to foster a contemplative atmosphere. In Ancient Egypt, where sunlight was often pervasive and blinding, the eye of the sun-god Ra was the most significant cultural symbol.32 “I am the one who openeth his eyes, and there is light; When his eyes close, darkness falleth,” Ra says, in the Turin papyrus from 1300 B.C. To be touched by sunlight was to be within the god's sight; light was Ra’s seeing materialized.33 Daylight and its entry into interiors was therefore an important consideration in how places of worship were built: the temple of Rameses was oriented in a manner that allowed sunlight to be cast upon its inner sanctuary on only two days a year, illuminating two statues of Ra and Rameses.34 Similarly, the layout and orientation of Classical Greek temples were designed concerning the position of the sun. In the Parthenon (c. 447-438 BC), the statue of Athena was gilded and placed beside a reflective pool, which when illuminated by sunlight entering through the main door, suffused the room in a mystical glow.35 The ever-changing quality of light, the perpetual nature of its movement, and its varying effects on interior space were both understood and utilized by builders of early religious architecture to amplify spiritual experiences.

34 Levin, “The Eye of Ra”, 15.
35 “Source”, 25.
With this context in mind, the eventual introduction of stained-glass windows in Christian churches seems inevitable. Though examples of wall openings being utilized to amplify religious experience can be found in the earliest civilizations, the Christian Church made glass windows a *sine qua non* of theological architecture. The use of stained glass in churches traces back to as early as the seventh century AD\(^ {36} \), however it peaked in both widespread use and quality during the High Gothic period (mid-1200–1500), during which architects built increasingly larger churches using innovations such as flying buttresses and interior arches and ribs.\(^ {37} \) Stained glass windows increased in both number and scale, as they no longer posed a threat to the structural integrity of the building.\(^ {38} \) While initially they were placed in small openings in the bays of the church, separated by walls, windows could now achieve new heights, both literally and figuratively.\(^ {39} \) Embodying the new innovations of church architecture is Chartres Cathedral, which was completed in 1260 on the site of a destroyed Romanesque church in Chartres, France. The cathedral featured more than 183 stained glass windows at the time of its consecration, including three large “rose-windows”, circular windows segmented by stone mullions to form a flower-like shape. In his novel *The Cathedral*, set in Chartres, J.K. Huysmans’ narrator describes one’s experience of the church, writing,

> How grandiose and how aerial was this cathedral, sprung like a jet from the soul of a man who had formed it in his own image, to record his ascent in mystic paths, up and up by degrees in the light; passing through the contemplative life in the transept, soaring in the choir into the full glory of the unitive life, far away now from the purgatorial life, the dark passage of the nave.

And this assumption of a soul was attended, supported, by the bands of angels, the apostles, the prophets, and the righteous, all arrayed in their glorified bodies of flame, an escort of honour to the Cross lying low on the stones, and the image of the Mother enthroned in all the high places of this vast reliquary, opening the walls, as it seemed, to

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\(^ {36} \) [https://www.stainedglass.org/learning-resources/history-stained-glass](https://www.stainedglass.org/learning-resources/history-stained-glass)

\(^ {37} \) Jütte, *Transparency*, 87.

\(^ {38} \) Jütte, *Transparency*, 88.

\(^ {39} \) Grodecki, 13
present to Her, as for a perpetual festival, their posies of gems that had blossomed in the fiery heat of the glass windows.\textsuperscript{40}

Huysmans’ rich description of the cathedral captures the extent to which Gothic church architecture was designed with attention to the amplification of religious experience—as well as the effect of standing before these windows. The stained glass and the images it depicted entered the soul of the church-goer directly, who was inspired to enter by the spiritual reflection prompted by the sheer grandeur of the building.

Christian belief in light as a materialization of the Divine aligns with the New Testament and Christ’s famous statement: “I am the light of the world.”\textsuperscript{41} The light which passes through stained glass represents God’s light and grace entering his believers.\textsuperscript{42} In a culture in which few were literate, visual iconography was the primary means through which religious doctrine was learned. Stained glass windows were therefore designed with depictions of biblical narratives, with particular focus on the lives of saints. Sunlight illuminated and brought these images alive, emphasizing their divine significance as transmissions from God. Both viewing these narratives and being immersed in colored light was somewhat of a cinematic experience for medieval church-goers, one that could not be found in their everyday lives.\textsuperscript{43} It was this unique kinetic quality of the church interior, which could not be experienced from the outside, that encouraged congregants to enter. There was no possibility of viewing the outside world, believed to be the realm of sin in Christianity, through these windows. Upon their entry into the church, Christians were immersed in a mystical refuge from the outside world, colored by light emanating from God himself.

\textsuperscript{41} John 8:12 (ESV)
\textsuperscript{42} Jütte, \textit{Transparency}, 82.
\textsuperscript{43} Jütte, \textit{Transparency}, 84.
Glass production methods were guarded by church patrons and libraries in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The secrets of glassmaking technology were further kept within Venetian artisan circles between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, allowing them to dominate the European glass industry.\textsuperscript{44} Glass remained an expensive material through the medieval period despite the industry’s growth, due to the high production costs. The hazards of glasswork, such as prolonged exposure to scorching temperatures, made glassmakers at the time some of the highest paid artisans.\textsuperscript{45} The inclusion of glass windows in domestic buildings was a gradual development. Colored glass, which was more expensive than its transparent counterpart, became preferable in the homes of the wealthy and was coveted due to both its high cost and divine associations.\textsuperscript{46} Secular stained glass windows were also commissioned by patrons, featuring images such as family crests and their merchant ships.\textsuperscript{47} The transparency of a window-pane was not initially an explicit concern in medieval domestic architecture, however the invention of printing in the fifteenth century made interior lighting imperative to conducting day-to-day work.\textsuperscript{48} Fenestration following this period prioritized the maximum influx of daylight, and transparent windows covered the majority of the facades of sixteenth and seventeenth century European buildings.\textsuperscript{49}

The glass window and daylight would continue to be considered a luxury, as they had been in Imperial Rome, in the centuries following the perfection of translucent plate glass production. The homes of poor and middle-class individuals continued to utilize paper or linen cloth as sealants through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries due to plate glass’ high cost. During the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, a local flat-glass industry emerged in England, lowering the cost and increasing

\textsuperscript{44} Anne Friedberg, \textit{The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft}, (MIT Press: 2009), 108.
\textsuperscript{45} Jütte, \textit{Transparency}, 99-100.
\textsuperscript{46} Jütte, \textit{Transparency}, 105.
\textsuperscript{47} Jütte, \textit{Transparency}, 106.
\textsuperscript{48} Jütte, \textit{Transparency}, 135.
\textsuperscript{49} Jütte, \textit{Transparency}, 139.
accessibility to glass windows. This marked a shift from a primitive way of living to a more civilized one, giving the association between windows and glass a greater degree of specificity. Those who continued to use the ‘unfashionable’ sealants of the past, such as stretched animal skins or cloth, were regarded with contempt and condescension, as it signaled their position on the lowest social strata.\(^{50}\) The use of windows as a means to demonstrate wealth only escalated in response to their ubiquity. The Elizabethan homes of the very elite were built with windows in such great numbers that buildings such as Hardwick Hall, built between 1590 and 1597, appeared to be “more glass than wall.” These buildings became known as ‘lantern houses’ due to the way they glowed from their interiors at night.\(^{51}\)

Glass windows continued to gain architectural prominence into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, becoming important features of public buildings such as factories, greenhouses, exhibition halls, and department stores which called for abundant light. Architect Joseph Paxton’s Crystal Palace in London, constructed for the Great Exhibition of 1851, was a structure built almost entirely of iron bars and glass planes, rendering it essentially a 990,000-square-foot greenhouse. Other commercial buildings that utilized glass as the prominent material include the food market Les Halles (1853-1853) and the shopping center Bon Marché in Paris (1869-1887).\(^{52}\) The store window, which will be discussed at length in another chapter, revolutionized pane glass and laid the foundation for Modernist architectural trends in which windows came to replace entire walls in domestic buildings.

\(^{50}\) Jütte, “Comfort, Class, and Climate Change”, 32.
\(^{51}\) Louw, 10
\(^{52}\) Friedberg, *The Virtual Window*, 112.
How we conceptualize interior spaces is, at least in part, determined by how much daylight can penetrate them. I can attest to the importance of light due to my own experiences living without it. It is why I identify the cardinal direction of each window in a house before choosing a room (North-facing windows receive the least amount of light, South-facing ones the most, Eastern windows fill a space with the golden rays of sunrise, Western ones those of sunset). We all endure this struggle for light in one way or another, whether it be in our efforts to find truth, meaning in our lives, or an affirmation of the divine. And what better representation of this than the oft-overlooked window? For what is life if not the search for light? Architecture is ultimately a reflection of culture, and, as Walter Benjamin wrote in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Production”, “Buildings have been man’s companions since primeval times. Many art forms have developed and perished…But the human need for shelter is lasting. Architecture has never been idle”. Architecture’s relevance to human beings has never faltered, and therefore it has never been still. To conceive of buildings as “companions” is to bring light to their inherent aliveness. We respond to them as much as they are built in response to us. Glass, with its capacity to both illuminate and insulate buildings, might thus be single most important material in architectural history.

The Glowing Window

*There is nothing more profound, more mysterious, more pregnant, more insidious, more dazzling than a window lighted by a single candle.*

Charles Baudelaire, “Windows”

When I lived in the small coastal town of St Andrews in Scotland, where daylight is limited in the winter, I would go on walks through the cobblestoned streets in the evening and collect photographs of each glowing window I passed. It was an aesthetic practice that had, in retrospect, emerged from my state of mind at the time. This period of my life, the very beginning of my college career, was punctuated by solitude, brought about by both the length of winter’s evenings and the very lonesome nature of trying to find one’s way in a new environment. My evening strolls along the unforgiving and immensely dark North Sea were the means through which I transformed my loneliness into *aloneness*, a state of being in which one feels not apart from the world, but rather an intrinsic part of it. If I turned my gaze towards the sea, I was casting myself into its darkness. If I turned instead towards the houses that lined it, I found myself within them, reassured of their aliveness, and in turn my own, by the glow of their window panes.

My solitude was still ensured by the barrier between interior and exterior maintained by the window pane, but I felt safe under the watchful gaze of lamplight. For the light that emanates from the house is vigilant; its glow watches over us while the world sleeps. As a poem titled “Emmuré” (Walled-in), cited by Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space*, begins: “A lighted lamp in the window/Watches in the secret heart of night.”\(^{54}\) Darkness is the container for the

\(^{54}\) Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 54.
unknown; it protects secrets and houses malevolent creatures. As I walked alone, I was hyper-aware of my vulnerability to strangers who might emerge from evening’s shadows with ill intentions. It was the quietest place I’d ever lived. Sidewalks cleared with evening’s arrival, storefronts closed, and I experienced something impossible in New York: complete and total aloneness. I often thought about how my parents told me to run into the nearest store or bodega if I ever found myself in trouble in the city. My fear of darkened, empty streets became all the more acute without this option. In place of these lifelines, the glowing windows I passed assured me that I was being watched over. That I could knock on a door and be immersed in the vigilant light that had beckoned me, and I would be safe once again.

During my first winter at Bard, I found myself drawn once again to illuminated windows. As I drove through the streets of Red Hook, I noticed singular candles (mostly battery-operated ones) positioned in the center of each window of certain houses. In contrast to the glowing windows of St Andrews, the candles’ brilliance could only be observed if the rest of the room was dark. I was entranced by the way they stood at the windows like guardians, stationed with the singular purpose of communicating something to all who passed by. The content of their message I did not yet know, but I knew that they were speaking. The tradition of placing a candle in each window at Christmas time came into being in seventeenth-century Ireland, during the persecution of Irish Catholics by the Protestant British government. Under the oppressive Penal Laws, Catholics were barred from practicing their religion in churches, and priests were forced into hiding. During Christmas, Irish Catholic families, hoping to receive sacraments, began placing candles in their windows and leaving their doors unlocked to signal to priests that they could safely enter.55 The tradition, which was brought to Colonial America by Irish immigrants, became a visual

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55 “What is the origin of the custom at Christmas of placing lit candles in the windows?” n.d. (Catholic Straight Answers)
shorthand for later generations; I didn’t know, at the time, that this is where my conception of a lit window as a signal of safety had originated. Free from religious persecution, the candle became a signal of welcoming anyone in, during a time when homes were placed at great distances from each other. It was also an invitation for saints to bless the home, or placed to commemorate an absent loved one. Whatever the reason behind the candle’s placement, the message was the same: we are here, and we have been waiting for you to come in.
Let There Be Light

A glowing window in St. Andrews, 2019
A glowing window in St. Andrews, 2019
II. Free as Air

For the worker even the need for fresh air ceases to be a need. Man returns to the cave dwelling again, but it is now poisoned by the pestilential breath of civilization. The worker has only a precarious right to inhabit it, for it has become an alien dwelling which may suddenly not be available, or from which he may be evicted if he does not pay the rent… The dwelling full of light which Prometheus, in Aeschylus, indicates as one of the great gifts by which he has changed savages into men, ceases to exist for the worker. Light, air, and the simplest animal cleanliness cease to be human needs.\textsuperscript{56} - Karl Marx

\textsuperscript{56} Fromm and Marx, \textit{Concept of Man}, 142.
The Public Threat

During the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, we quarantined ourselves to protect against a newly-emerged threat: air. Studies conducted in the months following the outbreak linked long-term exposure to air pollution with higher rates of mortality from the virus and observed that particulate atmospheric matter can be carriers of it, increasing the spread in polluted areas. What we knew at the time was simple: the outside world is dangerous, the inside is safe. Sequestered away from the outdoors, the windows in our homes became a way to control our interactions with fresh air. The invisibility of the virus made it all the more frightening; every space shared with others became a possible zone of contagion. Every cough was a threat; we maneuvered through narrow grocery store aisles to avoid being within a few feet of a stranger, we glared at those not wearing masks in the street, we sanitized and left deliveries out all night just in case one particle of virus still clung to it. Distrust among the public loomed over everything we did. The advice of the CDC was to keep windows open as wide and as often as possible, to prevent the virus from getting inside, which seemed contradictory. It was impossible to feel confident in our methods of prevention as we faced a villain we hardly understood. Open the windows to let air in, but don’t go out into it. Our perception of the distinction between public and private strengthened, and the only safe mediary was the window.

Each evening at seven o’clock, we momentarily punctured this division. We yelled out and cheered for those facing the invisible enemy head-on, our individual voices becoming one song that echoed across a deserted urban landscape. The cheering would inevitably disperse and the city fell silent (or at least as silent as is possible in New York) again. We closed our windows, severing

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whatever ties to the public formed during those fifteen minutes. “For many New Yorkers, the time of coronavirus will be defined by two sounds.” journalist Andy Newman wrote in April 2020 for the *New York Times*, “One is the ambulance siren, shrieking at all hours through the deserted streets. The other is its opposite: the nightly 7 o’clock cheer for front-line workers.” At least for me, Newman’s prediction has proven true. I remember both the demure quietude of those monotonous days and the eruption of sound at sunset. My ex-boyfriend’s mother would push an African beaded horn, once only a decorative souvenir, through the narrow window opening and blow it out into the air, twenty-seven stories above the street. It became one consistent routine in a day which was difficult to differentiate from the one prior. Air turned from a menace to our safety into a vehicle that could carry hope and foster a sense of solidarity. The ritual was also a reminder of how good we had it up there, how lucky we were to have control over when to interact with the public and when not to. Through our windows we had the ability to see without touching, to breathe out without inhaling the direct breath of another, to witness turmoil without experiencing it ourselves.

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The secondary function within the window’s definition is the ventilation of an interior space. In the Imperial Roman servitudes, this was protected, under the Law of Windows, as the right to be able to open a window to admit air. Throughout the history of the glass window, we can see the extent to which this function informed its development, and how economic factors have determined who has a right to fresh air and who does not. Stained glass in Medieval churches, the first widely used application of glass windows, functioned neither to allow air in (they were

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often unopenable, despite the amount of smoke produced by numerous candles and incense alit inside), nor to provide any kind of view of the outside.\textsuperscript{61} It was with the emergence of the Bubonic Plague in Europe during the 14th century that glass windows began to be used in secular buildings. Physicians at the time believed \textit{miasmata} (foul odors) to be the primary cause of the plague’s spread, leading to widespread concerns about the influx of air into interior spaces. People were advised to keep their windows shut; a measure enforced by many city magistrates at the time. Some even nailed closed any openings, to further ensure safety from air itself.\textsuperscript{62} The first late-medieval public buildings to have glass windows were hospitals, as they were better sealants than the non-vitreous methods, such as stretched animal skins, which were used previously.\textsuperscript{63} What is interesting about this development is how the “unopenability” of the glass window was considered an advantage in preventing the spread of disease, informed by a fundamental misperception around its transmission (the pneumonic plague, also caused by the bacteria \textit{Yersinia pestis} could be transmitted airborne between two humans, while the bubonic plague could be transmitted via the bite of an infected animal).\textsuperscript{64} Air was considered both a necessity and a threat; ventilation was crucial to mitigating the smoke and soot produced by household activities but also posed the risk of inviting ‘bad air’ into the home.\textsuperscript{65}

The anxieties around fresh air that ran rampant during the Plague years echo, to a degree, the general fear of the outside world that emerged in 2020. Rumors proliferated that ill people “would breathe in the faces (out of their windows) of well people going by,” just as they had during

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\textsuperscript{61} Jütte \textit{Transparency}, 77-8.
\textsuperscript{62} Jütte, “Comfort, Class, and Climate Change”, 626.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 626
\textsuperscript{64} “Plague | Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) About Plague.”, n.d. (CDC Emergency Preparedness)
\textsuperscript{65} Jütte, “Comfort, Class, and Climate Change”, 626.
the London Plague of 1666, when Samuel Pepys wrote these words.66 This widespread distrust of
the sick, propagated by a fear of the possibility of contagion, informed our social interactions amid
the 2020 pandemic. As Daniel Jütte writes in “Comfort, Class, and Climate Change”: “One could,
in fact, argue that late medieval Europeans understood privacy not so much as the ability to
withdraw from other people and their gazes, but rather as the ability to seclude oneself from rank
air and bad odors.”67 The closure of windows, and the ability to control air, was an action that
secluded oneself away from public threats, both physical and microbial. Privacy was a state of
being protected from the public sphere, not merely the state of being away from it. As was the case
with our contemporary pandemic, this privilege of privacy was experienced by the upper-class far
more than the poor. In The Decameron, Boccaccio describes the fleeing of elites from cities to
their countryside estates, while “the condition of the common people (and belike, in great part, of
the middle class also) was yet more pitiable to behold, for that these, for the most part, retained by
hope or poverty in their houses and abiding in their quarters, sickened by the thousand daily and
being altogether untended and unsuccoured, died well-nigh all without recourse.”68 The Decameron
contains ten stories narrated by nobles who have fled Florence to their country
mansions and one of its key concerns is the extent to which privilege impedes one’s ability to
empathize with the struggles of the lower classes.69 Of those wealthy who fled, Boccaccio writes, “
they abode with music and such other diversions as they might have, never suffering themselves
to speak with any nor choosing to hear any news from without of death or sick folk.”70

67 Jütte, “Comfort, Class, and Climate Change”, 626.
69 McKinley, Kathryn, “How The Rich Reacted To The Bubonic Plague Has Eerie Similarities To Today's
Pandemic.” UMBC, (2020).
70 Boccaccio, The Decameron.
If this sounds familiar, it is due to the similar mass exodus of the wealthy from urban to rural which occurred during the onset of the Covid pandemic. Both reactions were in response to a fear of air that pervades during pandemics. In particular, the air breathed by those in private domiciles, in contrast to that of the city-dweller, is deemed safer. Even access to fresh air, a necessity of life we deem ‘free’, is still ultimately a class issue. In Privacy, Garret Keizer contends that “The best things in life may be free, but that seldom prevents those at the top of the food chain from appropriating a lion’s share of the best things. Air is free, but it tends to smell better in Malibu than East L.A.”\textsuperscript{71} The difference in quality of the air in East L.A. versus Malibu is due to the latter being in close proximity to nature (literally on the Pacific), while the former is located in a densely populated urban area. As Keizer notes, the free nature of air does not exempt it from being appropriated by the upper-class, who are able to inhabit spaces where fresher, and “better smelling” air is accessible. As previously noted, the population of poorer and denser urban areas are at far higher risk of being exposed to air pollutants than those living under antipodal conditions. Keizer is acknowledging a disparity between rich and poor exacerbated by the relative architecture and location of each group.

Given our current climate situation, and the increasing number of airborne pollutants due to emissions, it is of the utmost importance to understand why the ‘right to air’ is one not distributed equally between social groups. The window, an instrument that determines who has control over fresh air and who does not, is therefore crucial to the investigation of this subject. As the cultural and architectural trends of pandemic periods suggest, our relationship to air is informed by who we share it with and how we perceive it. When air becomes a threat, the entirety of the public is put at risk, and we respond by sequestering in private. In our seclusion, we questioned

\textsuperscript{71} Garret Keizer, Privacy, (Picador: 2012), 2.
whether or not physical interaction with the public was ever necessary, if it exposes us to danger.

Our cheers that resounded across an unfamiliarly desolate city were for those we deemed brave for being willing to work in the menacing outside. But we still ordered deliveries and spoke to friends from great distances apart, our desire for a taste of our former lives lived amidst others only strengthened by our seclusion. We exerted control in all the ways available to us. And with each breath, we simultaneously strengthened and threatened the division between these two spaces.
The 1696 English Window Tax

During a trip to London, I noticed a bizarre architectural trend as I strolled through the city’s winding streets and alleys. Numerous buildings of three stories or more featured, on their facades, windows that appeared to have been bricked up. Some entire sides had window frames that held rows of bricks rather than panes of glass. Why would an architect designate such features only to abandon them? Why leave behind the ghostly shape of an intention, removing an object from its function? The story behind these deceptive facades is an almost two-century-long history of government negligence, greed, and a complete failure to meet the needs of their most disadvantaged populations.

In 1696, King William III imposed legislation that placed a tax on the number of windows in a single dwelling. It intended to increase taxes for the wealthy, as windows were a luxury generally only featured in abundance on the houses of the rich. It stipulated that houses with more than ten windows would be subject to additional taxes. Exemptions under the tax included factories, public libraries, dairies, granaries, and coach makers, which were rationalized under two conditions: firstly, that the windows functioned primarily to provide ventilation, and secondly, that the workers at a factory required light, necessitating the use of glass panes. For rural populations, the theory that the rich would be subject to far higher taxes than the poor under this legislation proved true. However, the tax had grave, unforeseen consequences on the urban poor. This population, in contrast to their rural counterparts, was more likely to reside in tenements that had been built with more than the legislation’s minimum number of windows. Landlords of these buildings, being the subjects of the tax, developed a strategy to lower these additional costs by

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bricking or boarding up many of their buildings’ windows. Tenement constructions following the tax’s implementation lacked adequate window accommodations altogether. The tax not only subjected tenants to higher rents, with landlords increasing the rent due to the extra charges but also to the adverse health effects caused by inadequate sunlight and ventilation in a domicile.

By reducing the number of windows in their buildings, landlords were forcing tenants to live in spaces that ensured both their mental and physical health. In 1781, a typhoid epidemic broke out in Carlisle, a city located in northern England. The outbreak was traced back by Dr John Heysham to one building inhabited by six poor families. Of the state of the dwelling, the physician wrote: “The smell in this house was overpowering and offensive to an unbearable extent.” Fifty-two of the building’s inhabitants were killed during the outbreak.73 The importance of ventilation in mitigating the spread of disease became difficult to ignore over the two centuries following the window tax’s implementation. Its consequences on public health reached national attention during the Victorian Era, with officials speaking out about the connection between the tax and the growing epidemics in cities. A report by the health committee of Sunderland in 1845 declared the tax “evil, “and unanimously concluded that “that the blocking up of the numerous windows caused by the anxiety of their owners to escape the payment of the tax, has, in very many instances, greatly aggravated, and has even...in some cases been the primary cause of much sickness and mortality.”74

The writer and activist Charles Dickens wrote in his publication Household Words that,

The adage ‘free as air’ has become obsolete by Act of Parliament. Neither air nor light have been free since the imposition of the window-tax. We are obliged to pay for what nature lavishly supplies to all, at so much per window per year; and the poor who cannot afford the expense are stunted in two of the most urgent necessities of life.75

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The window tax would not be repealed until 1851, following a national campaign focusing on its deadly consequences on public health. The still-boarded-up façades of many urban buildings in England serve as reminders of the nearly century-and-a-half period during which the government failed and neglected its poorest subjects. What the history of the tax demonstrates is the extent to which the ‘right to air’ is contingent upon one’s social standing.

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76 “Housing - Window Tax”, n.d.
Andy Billman, A building on Pitt Street in London, circa 1844-64.
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Windows were, and continue to be, demarcations of class that indicate who does and who does not have a right to isolate themselves from the public. Nothing embodies our interconnectedness with others to the same extent as air. Therefore, the persistence of classist formulations as to its access is all the more alarming. As early as the medieval period, the notion of privacy was conceived as the ability to sequester oneself against miasmatic threats. If air is essential, then the ability to control our access to it is pertinent to maintaining health and well-being. In the quotation at the opening of this chapter, Marx identifies the alienation of the worker from his own home, generated by the threat of eviction, as one of many consequences for the working class in a capitalist society. This alienation is the product of having traded essential human needs, like access to light and air, for access to private space. “Filth, this corruption and putrefaction which runs in the sewers of civilization (this is to be taken literally)”, he goes on to write, “becomes the element in which man lives. Total and unnatural neglect, putrefied nature, becomes the element in which he lives.” The worker is no longer even entitled to animal rights, being subjected to a stratified world where their potentiality is putrefied nature. The tenuous access to essentials (air, water, cleanliness) is predicated on the threat of filth; this state is made acceptable by capital’s destruction of the worker’s connection to nature. Marx’s claim relates to the consequences of England’s Window Tax, which were felt predominantly by the lower-classes who had no choice but to live in windowless tenements. The lack of choice in the quality of one’s habitation is crucial to understanding why access to fresh air is inherently a class issue. The lower-class, from the perspective of capital, is no longer entitled to such basic human necessities, and must accept this “needless” condition in order to ensure their access to habitation. In this alienated

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state, the worker becomes increasingly dependent on monetary gain in order to satisfy new needs, which are concerned with idealistic notions of achievement under capitalism: command over the goods they produce. The anxieties which proliferate towards air during pandemic eras ultimately reflect an altered relationship between public and private, in which health is ensured by an ability to assert control over the outside world.

Marx’s concept of the alienation of the worker is helpful in understanding the historicity of inequitable distribution of access to fresh air. The ambitions of the lower-class, who have been forced to adjust to a diminished standard of living, due to the poor conditions of tenements, become oriented towards material needs. These tenements symbolize the sacrifice forced upon the working class (natural human necessities) in order to ensure they have a place to call home. The stratification of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie is reflected in the very air they breathe, and where they are breathing it.

Everyday corporate elites take the train from their sprawling suburban homes with “better-smelling” air to work in the skyscraper. On their journey they no-doubt watch innumerable housing projects and undesirably-located houses lining the train tracks recede rapidly into the distance. They catch a passing glimpse into the lives of those less-fortunate than themselves, and perhaps think to themselves how awful it must be to live with the constant sound of trains. They may for a few minutes upon their train’s arrival be subjected to the foul smells of urine on pavement, the screech of the subway, the elbowing of fellow commuters, but soon they will be above it all, safe in their glass towers. It is here that my conception of air veers towards the abstract, transformed from a literal necessity into a metaphysical one.

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78 Fromm and Marx, *Concept of Man*, 141.
The Architecture of Capitalism

*In New York my hotel room is on the twenty-first floor, about two-hundred and twenty-five feet above the ground. I was greatly surprised that I by no means lost contact with the ground. My myopic eyes easily, even very clearly, grasp the activities in the street–people, cars in movement…There is joined to it a joyous and exalting sensation of space, extent, freedom, which I had always imagined, and which I enjoy here to the fullest degree…men have always tried to lift themselves up, to climb as high as possible.*

Le Corbusier

In Alfred Stieglitz’s 1910 photograph, *Old and New New York*, the shell of a skyscraper under construction looms in the background of a New York City street lined with brownstones. Stieglitz, a key figure in establishing photography as a form of modern art in America, focused his lens on the rapidly changing landscape of New York at the turn of the century. His photographs depict the industrialized city as a site of opposition between the modern (cold, depersonalized, geometric) and the old (lively, authentic). *Old and New New York* shows this contrast in a literal mode, the brownstones of yore are dark and cast in shadows, appearing permanent and heavy. The skyscraper being built in the background is fragile in contrast, a semi-transparent geometric shell

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whose color fades as its flights climb up to the sky. The composition foreshadows the degree to which the new will overtake the old; the loss of the authentic in pursuit of the modern. The skyscraper developed as a uniquely American response to increasing population density and the growth of corporations in cities during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Writing in 1896,
the so-called “father of skyscrapers” Louis Sullivan claimed that tallness in a building expressed a “sentiment of largeness and freedom,” and that “It must be tall, every inch of it tall…It must be every inch a proud and soaring thing rising in sheer exaltation that from bottom to top, it is a unit without a single dissenting line—that is, it is the new, the unexpected, the eloquent perforation of most bald, most sinister, most forbidden conditions.” Achieving tallness in building embodied the tenets of American culture: freedom, ingenuity, and the pursuit of success. And thus, for over a century we have watched American cities become dense forests of sky-piercing glass and steel phalluses; landscapes of a dream we are all taught to aspire to, but is, in actuality, only achievable by a very fortunate few.

To the city-native, skyscrapers might symbolize not material success but rather never-ending urban development, the destruction of the authentic by greedy real estate developers, the relentlessness of the rat race. However, to the tourist, the towering glass structures are awe-inspiring. A shared frustration of many New Yorkers is the phenomenon of tourists stopping in the middle of the sidewalk, often in large clumps, to crane their necks in sheer amazement at our skyscrapers. We may huff as we squeeze past them, annoyed with their naivete, their complete ignorance to the fact that we are perpetually in a rush and that they are so in awe of the ubiquitous glass and steel structures bemoaned by those who identify as real New Yorkers. “One of the great tragedies of my life was that I had the misfortune to arrive in New York City at the beginning of its end,” Jeremiah Moss opens his aptly titled Vanishing New York. I share this sentiment, having been raised in an East Village that had already lost its famous “coolness” by the time I was born in 2001. My grief is oriented towards a city I never got to experience myself. But my “New Yorker”

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82 According to a study by the City of New York and the Department of City Planning, tourists actually walk 11 percent slower than locals!
nostalgia is ultimately as inauthentic as the tourist’s reaction to skyscrapers, just instructed by a different stereotype of the city-dweller. If my love for my city was truly unconditional, I would accept its changes with the same fervor that I currently resent them. “Maybe we become New Yorkers the day we realize that New York will go on without us,” Colson Whitehead writes in *The Colossus of New York*, “To put off the inevitable, we try to fix the city in place, remember it as it was, doing to the city what we would never allow to be done to ourselves. New York City does not hold our former selves against us. Perhaps we can extend it the same courtesy.”

To that I could exclaim in vain, “But what about that awful green-glass tower that ruined Astor Place? And the million-dollar condominiums next door that robbed my childhood apartment of natural sunlight?” But no number of examples can ultimately prevent me from acknowledging the truth of Whitehead’s statement. I cannot expect my city to never-change because I cannot hold myself to the same standard. But what I can say for certain, with only the slightest inflection of a bitter-New Yorker, is that the rapid gentrification and reconstruction of Manhattan, which has spread in the past two decades to the other boroughs like an ever-evolving virus, has been expressed with the greatest ferocity in one material: glass.

The NYC tourists phenomenon described above is a natural reaction to seeing a vertical landscape for the first time. It is too, I would argue, an act of dreaming. Judy Price writes in *City Levels*, “Seen from outside and from street level, the fantasy of inhabiting the tower and to enter an imaginary space where we might acquire the qualities of the high-rise itself: boldness, monumental dominance, and sheer luxury of surface.” Price’s critique contains an understanding of the skyscraper as an embodiment of social ascendancy. A skyscraper in daylight is a tall castle

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of glass, reflecting light and images of the city surrounding it. It is a mirror onto which we can project our fantasies of achievement, we can see its windows but not what is occurring behind them. A building made entirely of windows offers the casual walker an opportunity to imagine the thrill of occupying it. It is the architecture of the American dream, to inhabit it is to take on all of the attributes that give it a sense of grandeur and confidence, an effect fundamental to others' perception of it, as Price claims. This reflects the new standards towards necessity that Marx’s proletariat is subjected to. “Every man speculates upon creating a new need in another in order to force him to a new sacrifice, to place him in a new dependence, and to entice him into a new kind of pleasure and thereby into economic ruin,” Marx writes. The skyscraper embodies this “new kind of pleasure”, an impossible achievement for the proletariat that nonetheless only intensifies his desire for capital.

Ironically, the windows of skyscrapers are often permanently closed. Ventilation by HVAC systems have eradicated the need for openable windows, ensuring the climatic comfort of skyscraper inhabitants while shielding them from the air of urban chaos. (The “unopenability” of windows in these buildings became contentious during the Coronavirus pandemic, as natural ventilation was understood as crucial to lowering the risk of infection). Their sensorial relation to the public realm is a merely visual one, void of the unpleasantness that comes with being a walker of city streets. They cannot smell the exhaust of innumerable cars, the mystery liquid that pools beside the sidewalk, cannot hear the symphony of frenzied traffic nor the yells between urbanites across narrow streets. Embodying the grandiose characteristics of the towering skyscraper, the office poohbah’s sense of achievement is due to the fact that they are “above it

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86 Fromm and Marx, *Concept of Man*, 140-1.
87 Susan Roaf, “Why more buildings don’t have windows that open”, in *Fast Company*, (August 12, 2020).
all”. And the rarity of this achievement renders it all the more impressive to themselves and others. The more one can view, the less one is exposed to the “air” of the public, and the more power one wields over the world laid out before them.

In a photograph from 1996, an unidentified patron of “Windows on the World”, a restaurant that was on the two top-floors of the World Trade Center’s North Tower, leans towards a window and gazes out onto its 50-mile view. The table is clear of dishes, the sun’s glare reflects from the window-pane and illuminates the man’s face. He is alone, and appears to be glued to the landscape splayed out in front of him. In a 1997 New York Times review of the restaurant, critic Ruth Reichl writes that patrons are, “eager to feel that they are above it all, if only for a little while. Nobody wants to be brought down to earth.” The allure of “Windows on the World” is in its very name. The unencumbered views from its windows offer patrons a (perhaps rare) opportunity to feel like they are “above it all”; for a meal they are no longer subjected to the disorder of the city’s surface. To gaze up at a skyscraper is to watch the game, to look down from within is to have won it. We can recall the notion is the ‘corner office’, an embodiment of this hierarchy. In a time before hybrid work, the corner office and the unobstructed views it offered of the city were a symbol of having reached the upper levels of a corporate hierarchy. Those occupying them quite literally looked down upon all other members of society, in contrast to the rank-in-file workers situated in cubicles in the center, positioned the furthest from daylight and windows. (Succession fans may recall a scene from season 1, in which Roman Roy, having just secured COO at Waystar Royco, celebrates

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by masturbating at his new office window, all while gazing down at all the “ants” below. A whole other Senior Project could tackle the issue of Roman Roy’s sexuality, but I think you get the metaphor). On the experience of being in the World Trade Center, Michel de Certeau wrote in *The Practice of Everyday Life* that,

> One’s body is no longer clasped by the streets that turn and return it according to an anonymous law; nor is it possessed, whether as player or played, by the rumble of so many differences and by the nervousness of New York traffic. When one goes up there, he leaves behind the mass that carries off and mixes in itself any identity of authors or spectators…His elevation transfigures him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was “possessed” into a text that lies down before one’s eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god. The exaltation of a scopic and gnostic drive: the fiction of knowledge is related to this lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more.\(^9^1\)

The elevation of the skyscraper and its numerous windows makes the person inhabiting it feel complete dominion over the city landscape. They become Ra, looking down upon the world and analyzing the breadth of its narratives without being a character in them. They possess the world and are no longer “possessed” by it.

This correlation between windows and status can also be found in the architecture of newer residential developments. Apartments on the top floors of the 1,396-foot-tall 432 Park Avenue (the tallest building in the world at the time of its building in 2015), which promise to offer “unparalleled” views of Central Park and the five boroughs, are listed for purchase anywhere between 90 and 130 million dollars. (The building has since become infamous for its nearly 1,500 construction and design flaws, which have caused flooding, electricity outages, and the ability of residents to hear and feel the sounds and vibrations of wind hitting the structure). The privilege that I began to recognize during my time residing at that UWS high rise, as Le Corbusier put it in *When the Cathedrals Were White*, is “Space! That response to the aspiration of the human being, that relaxation for breathing and for the beating heart, that outpouring of self in looking far, from a height, over a vast, infinite, unlimited expanse.” The corporate executive looks out upon an urban landscape and can view themselves as an agent in its construction, a representation of modern American achievement. They have the ability to breathe out towards it without breathing in the noxious odors emanating from life within it. That is the window’s most pertinent cultural significance, its way of redefining the relationship between public and private in contemporary life. The glass window conveys quite literally the perceived barrier between these two spaces, and to be able to look out from it is to be privileged enough to negotiate your relationship with each.

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92 Corbusier, *When the Cathedrals were White*, 53.
We began by considering the delights and dangers of fresh air. We found ourselves in the shadow of the skyscraper, with its facade of innumerable inoperable windows, which represents a subversion of a communal life that entails sharing an atmosphere with others. It intensifies the separateness between individuals of different classes, encouraging dominance of one over another. Our sense of connectedness with others is put at stake by the vertical landscape, which is a materialization of social stratification in an urban environment. The full implications of living without access to some of the most basic requirements of human wellness: fresh air and daylight, are felt most intensely by the disadvantaged, and the continued association between windows and luxury causes these consequences to endure. The question of who has a right to fresh air is ultimately the question of who has the right to control their contact with the public.

In Glass, a book published in 1923 by the Pittsburgh Plate Glass company, the author writes, “No legislator today would dare to attempt to levy a tax on windows, as was done in early England: too keenly this generation appreciates the comforts of its homes, and offices, and factories, flooded with light and yet airy.”93 However, despite contemporary “appreciation” for windows, our designation of them as a luxury have not evolved, as in the case of contemporary discourse surrounding their inclusion in buildings. In the spring of 2023, New York City Mayor Eric Adams received criticism for insinuating that the city’s 1879 legislation, The Tenement House Act, banning windowless bedrooms should be repealed to convert emptied office spaces into affordable housing. “Why can’t we do a real examination of the legislation that states every bedroom must have a window?” he mused in a WNYC interview, “You don’t need no window while you’re sleeping!”94 The complete and utter ignorance demonstrated by Adams during the

housing panel, the credence that windows are a privilege and not a right, is unfortunately not a unique one. The late billionaire, nonagenarian, and amateur architect Charlie Munger proposed a plan for new student dorms at the University of California Santa Barbara with rooms featuring “artificial windows” in place of real ones. His $200 million contribution to the university is entirely contingent on the dorm following his windowless design, which has been approved in UCSB’s Long Range Development Plan. In an interview with Architectural Record, Munger said that a lack of windows is “quite endurable, especially with good ventilation. Nobody minds going into a basement restroom and peeing because there’s no window.” “Endurable”, I would argue, is not what I would strive for when designing a living space, as using a bathroom without windows is not the same experience as living with one. He believes his design promotes collaboration between students since the only windows are in the common spaces, and that this will “enormously improve the behavior of the males.” In his resignation letter from the UCSB design review committee, following the design’s approval, architect Dennis McFadden wrote: “An ample body of documented evidence shows that interior environments with access to natural light, air, and views to nature improve both the physical and mental wellbeing of occupants.” The responses of students living in a smaller-scale realized version of Munger’s design at the University of Michigan, the Munger Graduate Residences, range from feelings of resignation to disgruntlement.

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97 Fred Bernstein, “Exclusive Interview with Billionaire Charlie Munger on Controversial UCSB Dorm”, in Architectural Record, (November 1,2021).
98 Bernstein, “Exclusive Interview with Billionaire Charlie Munger”.
Some “got used to it,” while others equate the experience of a windowless room with feeling like “living in a prison.”

Though the detrimental physical health effects that emerged as a result of England’s window tax are mitigated in contemporary designs of windowless rooms, due to modern methods of air filtration, it is an undeniable fact that a life with windows is better than one without them. In a 2021 study conducted in Sweden on the sociological and psychological effects of windows in homes, researchers asked participants, “What would a wall instead of a window opening mean to your everyday living, day and night?” The researchers concluded through their interviews that windows were perceived as having a range of functions: “to provide practical services, for example, cool air, task lighting, and daily rhythm, to support additional experiences of comfort, for example, spatial brightness, indoor pleasantness, improved mood, spaciousness, and visual privacy,” and “to mediate information about outdoor conditions and interaction between residents and people outside—allowing observation, verbal communication and the use of intentional or unintentional visual cues.” They found windows to be instrumental in the fulfillment of two basic psychological needs: relatedness and autonomy. The former need, relatedness, refers to the extent to which a person feels connected to others in a social environment. The bilateral transparency of a window enables connection between residents and the outside world to occur: “For example, by following ‘window blind etiquette’ people show they care for others or want to

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99 Berg, “Life inside a windowless dorm”.
be accepted by others.” The second need, autonomy, is achieved through the ability to control daylight and privacy by way of curtains or blinds.\textsuperscript{103}

This notion of feeling connected to others as a psychological necessity that is encouraged by the window is the reason why a conflict between public and private spaces emerged during the 2020 pandemic. Air, something we inherently share with others, is a physical embodiment of not only relatedness, but also our dependence on other organisms that inhabit our planet. The continuity of the medieval conception of privacy as being contingent upon the ability to seclude oneself from “bad air” was illuminated by the recent pandemic, but its subtle application is reflected in contemporary architecture. The ability to quarantine, whether in an apartment or a country house, expresses the degree of privacy one has been deemed entitled to. But what is sacrificed in pursuit of the private? What the results of the Swedish study prove is how multifaceted our relationship to windows has become, in particular how their mediation of the public and private impacts our lived experience. “The presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves,” Hannah Arendt writes in “The Public Realm”,

and while the intimacy of a fully developed private life, such as had never been known before the rise of the modern age and the concomitant decline of the public realm, will always greatly intensify and enrich the whole scale of subjective emotions and private feelings, this intensification will always come to pass at the expense of the assurance of the reality of the world and men.\textsuperscript{104}

We interpret our individual experience in terms of that of those around us, necessitating a seamlessness to exist between the public and private realms. Our sense of reality, Arendt suggests, is contingent on our access to the outside world. When sensorial access to the outside is prevented, it causes one to feel confined within themselves. It is for this reason that prisoners in solitary

\textsuperscript{103} Gerhardsson and Laike, “Windows”, 481.
confinement experience increased anxiety, psychosis, and suicidal thoughts. They have been robbed of both their sense of autonomy and of relatedness. Franz Kafka, in his short story “The Street Window”, writes:

WHOEVER leads a solitary life and yet now and then wants to attach himself somewhere, whoever, according to changes in the time of day, the weather, the state of his business, and the like, suddenly wishes to see any arm at all to which he might cling -- he will not be able to manage for long without a window looking on to the street. And if he is in the mood of not desiring anything and only goes to his window sill a tired man, with eyes turning from his public to heaven and back again, not wanting to look out and having thrown his head up a little, even then the horses below will draw him down into their train of wagons and tumult, and so at last into the human harmony.\footnote{Franz Kafka, “The Street Window”, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir, in \textit{The Complete Stories}, (New York: Schocken Books Inc.: 1971), 412.}

To be alone is not to be confined to oneself, it is an opportunity to realize one’s own participation in the “human harmony” described by Kafka. However, this realization is only possible when the outside world can exist within our interiors.

Air and light: these are necessities. But even the hermit, in Kafka’s telling, needs to feel, if only on occasion, a sense of autonomy in his interactions with the outside world. Let us now turn our gaze \textit{through} the window, to that which exists both behind and beyond it.
III. A Room with a View

Walls of light! Henceforth the idea of the window will be modified. Till now the function of the window was to provide light and air and to be looked through. Of these classified functions I should retain one only, that of being looked through...To see out of doors, to lean out.¹⁰⁶

Le Corbusier

This past summer, I had the rare opportunity to meet a real-life astronaut. It was Jessica Meir, a member of NASA's first ever all-female space walk in 2019. When I asked her how it felt to look down upon Earth for the first time from space, through the window of the space shuttle to the International Space Station, she told me that she was struck by how small it all seemed from the immeasurable distance. “Every person you have ever met, every place you have ever been, is down there, suddenly far beneath you. It is only then you can fully understand how small we are in the grand scheme of things.” Meir experienced what I would characterize colloquially as the most “elite” view. Very few in their lifetimes will have the opportunity to take in the entirety of the planet they live on from the vantage point of literal space. If we have a view, it is often a contained one. The corner of urban activity we can witness through our apartments is only a microcosm of contemporary life, yet our experience of observing it can inspire a similar shift in perspective as Meir’s. I remember how on my last voyage to California, I saw the Grand Canyon through the window of an airplane and was driven to tears by the fact of my own smallness in the face of something so magnificent.

As I write this, I am watching the wind rustle and shake off autumn’s red and orange leaves through the window beside my library desk. This is where my gaze turns at each pause when I must take a moment of quiet to form each string of words. In observing the shivering trees, I am extending myself outwards; I can feel the intrinsic connection between me and everything else. I am one with it all, I am every falling leaf, every shaking branch. And I too am changing with the season. The sun sets sooner now, and I grieve the loss of summer’s long days as I struggle to write in the evening. The window centers me, it allows me to understand my trials in the context of nature's ebb and flow.

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What I have at this moment, which I did not for most of my life, is a space with a view. Perhaps the function of a window least understood as a necessity, access to a view has historically been a privilege afforded to the upper classes, particularly in cities. The very notion of the view has its own history. Prior to the invention of television, looking out of a window was one of the most popular leisure activities for Europeans. Into the 1960s, Viennese merchants sold “window stools”, seats designed with the explicit purpose of being placed behind windows so users could comfortably gaze out. Similar furniture was used as early as the medieval period, evidence that this practice dates to the emergence of the glass window itself. The third easement within the Roman prospectus was the right to a view out of one’s window, which entailed that one’s view could not be obstructed by a neighbor’s building, a legal framework that was not enacted in future European nations. In seventeenth-century England, for example, the Court of King’s bench stipulated that a window view was a “delight”, but not an inherent right. In Jeremy Bentham’s conception of the panopticon—a circular institutional structure with windows through which a single inspector could surveil inmates, he considered that the inspector’s view into inmates’ cells would “supply [the inspector and his family] in their instance the place of that great and constant fund of entertainment to the sedentary and vacant in towns—the looking out of the window. The scene, though confined, would be a very various, and therefore, perhaps, not altogether an unamusing one.” In our contemporary society, expansive views are associated with the upper-class, as described in the section about the skyscraper. In “Window Gazes and World Views”, Jütte writes that the history of the view “can illuminate the changing history of how people in the past viewed the world they lived in and, more specifically, how they perceived an urban environment.

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109 Jütte, “Window Gazes”, 643-44
to which, unlike many people today, they were anything but indifferent.”¹¹⁰ What will be explored in this chapter are instances in which individuals are heedful towards window views, and the extent to which the view complicates our perception of public and private spaces as being inherently separate.

We shall begin with the store display window, a different interpretation of the “view” that nonetheless embodies the way glass windows impact the relationship between consumer and goods.

The Store Window

Looking at store windows is great entertainment because you can see all of these things and be glad it's not in your home, filling up your closets and drawers.

Andy Warhol

My first real dream job was to be a store window display designer. As a child, I would beg my mother to take me to Fifth Avenue during the holidays to look at the fantastical display windows of its luxury stores beneath the twinkling lights adorning their façades. In a city that is perpetually redefining itself, the annual spectacle, which draws in over 10 million visitors each year, felt like something I could count on to never change. It reawakens a golden age of American consumerism in the city that I would never experience myself. It becomes the New York in the opening of Woody Allen’s Manhattan, the New York Frank Sinatra wrote that song for and Frank O’Hara wrote all those poems about. The spectacle momentarily alleviates the brutality of urban winter. Over 10 million tourists and locals come to view these displays during the holiday season, a testament to the sheer magnitude and enduring attraction of the spectacle. In the post-pandemic era that has seen the shuttering of hundreds of department stores, and the anticipation of tens of thousands more to close in the coming years, the magic of the Fifth Avenue holiday displays is, at least in part, because they are remnants of a dying American consumer culture. The grandiose appeal of the classic department store was intensified by the 2008 financial crisis which intersected with the crest of my childhood. Experiencing the burden of the recession placed not only on my

own family but on the city at large. The glass was the only thing separating me from accessing a world adorned with Swarovski crystals and luxury goods.
The six windows on Bergdorf’s first floor contain the most famous displays on Fifth Avenue and have attracted New Yorkers and tourists alike for decades. Ten months are spent on design and production, with the actual installation taking 17 days. “Our windows are purposefully overloaded with props and decor,” Bergdorf’s senior director of visual presentation, said in an interview, “We design for different scales: from across the street, from a cab, from the point of view of a pedestrian. But it's only up close that tiny details and in-jokes jump out. The windows are meant to entertain and dazzle. We like to be a destination.” Though changing each year, displays are consistent in their campy, maximalist aesthetic. They are overloaded with various colors and textures, the luxury goods become actors in a theatrical production. Each window contains a fantastical reality in which amidst the visual chaos there is an irrefutable order—the colors all match, and each product has been placed exactly where it ought to be. Though the theatricality of the displays themselves contributed to their capacity to engender wonder in my child self, it was the very nature of their enclosure which made them uniquely spectacular. The glass pane functions to both stimulate the desire for the goods behind it and refuse access to them. We are drawn briefly into a dream we may not have realized we even had without the window, and what is a more successful salesman than dreaming itself? As one writer in the window trimming publication *Display World* put it, “After all, people don’t buy things, they buy hope.”

Prior to the 18th century, storefront windows were used to display products, but featured shutters or iron grilles that were closed outside of operating hours, barring visual access to the goods themselves. The birth of the modern window display in the United States occurred in 1889.

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113 “The Magic of Making Bergdorf's Windows”
114 *Display World*, vol. 49, no. 2, (August 1946), 118.
when publications geared towards retailers began to promote the importance of showcasing goods in a curated manner to increase desirability.\textsuperscript{116} Shop owners had previously either piled merchandise haphazardly in windows and onto the street, or neglected to display anything in their windows at all. The emergence of the shop window display coincided with that of visual advertising, which before the late 1800s was only associated with the distasteful promotional tactics of P.T. Barnum. Pictorial media became the favored means through which corporations reached consumers during the 1890s and early 1900s, due to the rapid growth of American industry. Mass-market newspapers and magazines became filled with advertisements, billboards, posters, and electric imagery reached ubiquity across the United States, and the concept of the national campaign was born.\textsuperscript{117} The power of visual imagery is in its ability to prompt an emotional response in a viewer, thereby connecting them to products in a way that was not possible with print. The display window is illusory in its suggestion that the goods are somewhat within reach. The business slogan of early advertising pioneer Elbert Hubbard was “economic salvation lies in closer relation to between the producer and consumer,”\textsuperscript{118} and indeed the development of both display windows and visual advertising was in pursuit of facilitating this closeness.

“How can a window sell goods?” the author and window trimmer L. Frank Baum pondered in \textit{The Art of Decorating Dry Goods Windows and Interiors}, published in 1900. “By placing them before the public in such a manner that the observer has a desire for them and enters the store…no matter how much she purchases under these conditions the credit of the sale belongs to the window.”\textsuperscript{119} Baum, most famous as the author of \textit{The Wonderful Wizard of Oz}, had a substantial

\textsuperscript{117} Leach, \textit{Land of Desire}, 42-3.
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid.
career as a “window trimmer,” with his manual *The Art of Decorating Dry Goods Windows and Interiors* being published the same year as *Oz*. Trimmers understood themselves to be artists in their own right, contributors to commercial achievement but not defined by the manipulative nature of their chosen form.\textsuperscript{120} However, it was the realization of the potential of windows in commercial spaces, and not domestic, that motivated advancements in plate glass technology during the 19th century.\textsuperscript{121}

The construction of new commercial spaces was key in efforts to modernize urban centers, first in Western Europe, and then in the United States.\textsuperscript{122} By 1915, nearly half of all plate glass produced globally was being imported to America, and spurred by increasing demands for it from department stores, domestic glass factories arose across the country.\textsuperscript{123} A tension therefore emerged between modernity and authenticity, during this period in cities such as New York, materialized in the contrast between the luxury department stores uptown, catering to the higher class, and the open-air markets downtown associated with a predominantly immigrant lower class.\textsuperscript{124} In the latter mode of retail, sensorial contact with goods was multifaceted. A consumer had a direct relationship, through smell, touch, and sight, with the merchandise being sold to them. The glass windows of the luxury store limited this relationship to a merely visual one, distinguishing those with the means to purchase the objects behind it from those who do not. As William Leach puts it in his book *Land of Desire*, “Reliance on glass for display had several significant consequences: It contributed to the formation of a new culture of class – that is, it helped

\textsuperscript{120} Fiona Maxwell, “All the Window's a Stage: Theatricality and Show Window Display”, *Ezra’s Archives*, vol. 8, no. 1, (Spring 2018), 2.
\textsuperscript{123} Leach, *Land of Desire*, 61.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 62.
to demarcate more clearly the affluent from the poorer buying public.” Merchants now wielded
the power of both stimulating desire in consumers and refusing access to them, the refusal of course
only intensifying one’s desire to possess the goods.

The seasonal nature of these displays is what makes them so special, even in a commercial
age where the power of the shop display window has waned with the rise of online shopping and
inescapable, highly personalized digital advertising methods. However, the revolutionary effect
that the advent of the modern display window during the 19th century had on the relationship
between consumers and goods cannot be overstated. The mediation between desire and
inaccessibility made possible by the display window now takes place in digital windows, in which
the glass of our screens mimics the glass window itself. Reactions to these commercial windows
varied from complete rapture to utter disgust. There are reports of a window display in Spokane,
Washington in which mannequins were clad in lingerie, attracting an obstreperous crowd of men
that had to be broken up by police. The novelist Edna Ferber described one Chicago shop
window in 1911 as “a work of art…a breeder of anarchism, a destroyer of contentment, a second
feast of Tantalus,” while Willa Cather found flowers displayed behind glass at flower stands in
New York as “seemingly somehow more lovely and alluring.” Display merchandising in itself
was not a new phenomenon, however, the development of plate glass facilitated a more intimate
experience of interacting with goods that was not possible before.

The success of the display window in luring consumers into stores is multifaceted. Similarly,
to a print or video advertisement, it contextualizes products within specific sociocultural
spaces, removing their direct value and using them as actors in a larger narrative to which a

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125 Leach, Land of Desire, 62.
126 Leach, Land of Desire, 66.
127 Leach, Land of Desire, 40.
consumer is encouraged to aspire. What distinguishes it from other forms of advertising is its existence in material reality. An entirely different experience of viewing occurs when products are separated from consumers by a single sheet of transparent plate glass. The shop display is a view in itself, the dominance of that which is held behind it is only able to be realized by those who can afford it. As Walter Benjamin wrote in “Experience and Poverty”, “It is no coincidence that glass is such a hard, smooth material to which nothing can be fixed… Glass is, in general, the enemy of secrets. It is also the enemy of possession.”

Glass simultaneously exposes us to material luxury and ensures that we are unable to possess it ourselves. It is at once cold and inviting, cruel in its enchanting nature. We may catch a passing glimpse of ourselves in its reflection, further intensifying the distance between us and what is behind it.

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The last time I was at Bergdorf Goodman, I stood outside and observed the varying reactions of passersby to the display windows. I watched two children stand in front of one and pose like mannequins for a picture and a group of Italian tourists stop and gaze up at the building’s façade, but, for the most part, people passed with their heads turned towards their phones, not given the displays a second glance. I started up a conversation with an older, nicely dressed woman who paid special attention to a magenta display holding crystal headdresses. When I asked her how long she had been looking at the displays, she said, “Oh, since I moved here in the 1960s. They have always been fabulous.” She told me that today she wasn’t planning on going into the store, but after seeing the display she “simply had to” go in to see more. It was a rare contemporary example of the store windows’ fulfilling their function of drawing consumers into a store. After she entered the store, and I watched the sea of pedestrians glued to their phones pass by, I felt hopeful that some of New York’s romance persisted despite its ever-changing nature.
A Voyeur of the Ordinary

I wrote in an email to a friend in 2019 that, “I remain convinced that if I had windows, I would spend hours looking out and imagining the lives of those I witnessed in perpetual motion, always either arriving or departing.” Part of the despair I felt within my childhood homes was because I was completely isolated from the world outside without windows that provided views of it. In my email, I articulate a feeling of having been robbed of some kind of experience I felt that others take for granted. An integral part of urban life is the complicated relationship between public and private, the anonymity ensured by a densely populated landscape which secures a degree of privacy, but also threatens it. “The thrill of visiting New York,” Garret Keizer writes in *Privacy*, “is largely the frisson of so many privacies jostling together in a public space.”129 Keizer identifies the fact that so many individual narratives are on display in the urban environment as the reason why it is so exhilarating to inhabit it. One of the most striking differences between the city and the rural is the way the private is always on display. In a city, Virginia Woolf puts it in her essay “Street Haunting”, “we shed the self our friends know us by and become part of that vast republican army of anonymous trampers.” We tend to feel that our privacy is perhaps protected by our anonymity in these public spaces, but make the exceptions for those spaces we deem to be private, such as our homes, regardless of how much visibility they allow for structurally.

The window is the device by which the public meets the private, it penetrates the phantasmagoric membrane of the urban landscape, and brings reality into full view. In the prose poem “Windows”, Charles Baudelaire describes what it is that attracts one to the window, writing,

Looking from outside into an open window one never sees as much as when one looks through a closed window. There is nothing deeper, more mysterious, more pregnant, more insidious, more dazzling than a window lighted by a single candle. What one can see in the

sunlight is always less interesting than what goes on behind a window pane. In that dark or luminous square life lives, life dreams, life suffers. Across the ocean of roofs I can see a middle-aged woman, her face already lined, who is forever bending over something and who never goes out. Out of her face, her dress and her gestures, out of practically nothing at all, I have made up this woman’s story, or rather legend, and sometimes I tell it to myself and weep.

If it had been a poor, old man, I could have made up his just as well. And then I go to bed proud to have lived and to have suffered in some one besides myself.

Perhaps you will say “Are you sure that your story is the real one?” But what does it matter what reality is outside myself, so long as it has helped me to live, to feel that I am, and what I am?

Baudelaire describes with great specificity the increasing dissolution between public and private occurring in modern life. A new mode of seeing has been created in the city. We can observe intimate realities through windows and transform them with invented narratives. The validity of his stories is unimportant to Baudelaire’s narrator; his observations lead him not to a greater understanding of others, but rather of himself. He bears witness to the old woman’s daily plights through her window pane and from this can experience suffering other than his own. And he is proud of his empathetic aptitude, shameless of making the possibly inaccurate conclusions about others that it requires. To gaze at windows is to simultaneously expand ourselves into the exterior world and to affirm our singularity. Each one of us is a star in the urban galaxy, susceptible to all the same joys and struggles as our cosmic neighbors. I can look into a townhouse window and feel envious of a life I do not have, until I see a couple fighting from opposite sides of the room or a woman dancing around her kitchen with a child on her hip, and my bitterness is replaced with empathy.

The fact that I grew up in New York, where the populace is essentially stacked upon each other, lends itself to why my interest in windows is so acute. My lack of windows has made me

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prone not only to gazing out of them but to looking into them. I walk west on 10th street and peer shamelessly into townhouses, judging the aesthetics of their inhabitants. I love dusk when lights turn on one by one and the urban jungle transforms into a sky full of stars. I collect pictures of cats sitting on window sills, posed like monarchs addressing their subjects. Recently, I found myself on the High Line at sunset and was appalled by how close the windows of the residential buildings along it were to the path. It was like walking through an exhibition, each window frame containing carefully made compositions of strangers’ lives. It seemed as if the residents were showing off all their finery, that they had made their spaces conscious of the fact that they would be seen by hundreds of people every day. And I am sure they look out. That they judge and observe the passersby. I wonder what it feels like to make contact, the inevitable meeting of eyes between the exhibitionist and the voyeur. Is it fear? Violation? Have they come to terms with the fact that the privilege of a view inherently comes along with being viewed yourself?

I was looking into the windows at the Moxy Hotel on Broome Street once when I met the eyes of a woman I’d been watching get ready for a night out. I decided to maintain my gaze when she saw me, curious as to what she would do after realizing she had a spectator. She pulled the curtain, then, bizarrely, walked in front of it, situating herself in the space between the glass and the fabric. And so there we were, each of us simultaneously observer and observed, trying to figure out what it was we were doing there. A few seconds later, she disappeared behind the now-closed curtain, and we were strangers once again, having been returned to our separate worlds. I wonder what she told her friends after our exchange, if she was horrified or flattered or some combination of the two. She noticed someone watching her and decided to watch them, either due to curiosity or a desire to take back some power by turning me into the subject. And I, being confronted with her gaze, did not hide either. I almost wanted her to see me, hoping it would perhaps comfort her
to know there was nothing menacing on the other side of the glass across the street. Just a woman viewing another, reaching out for a momentary connection amidst the chaos of urban life.

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I spent the early period of the pandemic quarantined with my ex-boyfriend and his family in their window-filled apartment. The first time I visited it, I ran around to look through every window to take each distinct view. It seemed that all of Upper Manhattan was on display just for us; one side offered clear views of Central Park North, another the totality of the Upper East Side and Harlem, and yet another slivers of the Hudson were visible through the skyscrapers lining West End. I remember my boyfriend telling me how wonderful it was to experience a snowstorm while sheltered inside of it. The monotony of those early pandemic days was mitigated by our ability to watch the seasons change outside. I wrote in my journal in April of 2020 that I’d “completely lost count of how many days I’ve been here: time has evaporated, the days are only distinguishable by whether they began with rain or sunshine.” I always opened the blinds after my boyfriend’s mom closed them, even when golden hour blinded me because blocking the view felt like a crime. Every day in that apartment was a stroke of luck. I was lucky to be loved, to be sheltered, and to occupy a space where I could interact with the outside while still being protected from it.

However, during the pandemic in particular, the sight that interested me the most beyond these wide panes of glass was the clear views into almost every apartment in the building across the street. When the sun set, the building came alive, lit like a Christmas tree by dozens of bright yellow squares. Every occupied apartment glowed in a unique hue: overhead lights bathed some in a fluorescent white, while a lone lamp in the corner could suffuse an entire room in yellow ochre. In search of any form of escape during those first months of isolation, I peered out of my
life and into the lives of others. I would even go as far as using binoculars to get a closer look at each scene, curious to know exactly what everyone else was eating for dinner that night or what part of *Tiger King* they had gotten to. In one apartment, a boy played *Fortnite* while his parents talked in the kitchen with crossed arms. At the same moment, in the apartment one floor below, a woman chopped onions, opening the oven every so often to ensure nothing was burning. And beneath her, a couple was intertwined on the couch, lit by the flashing colors of whatever played on the TV.

I never witnessed anything particularly salacious or unusual in my voyeuristic pursuits, nor would I say I was actively hoping to. So rapt was I by the mundanity contained in each window that it almost didn’t matter whether anything remarkable was happening inside. Voyeurism became a means to reconnect to a world that I felt radically disconnected from. The act of seeing without being seen also helped me regain a feeling of control that I had lost in the face of so much uncertainty. I often thought about that moment in *The Great Gatsby* when Nick, drunk at Myrtle’s apartment, peers out of the window and thinks to himself,

> High over the city our line of yellow windows must have contributed their share of human secrecy to the casual watcher in the darkening streets, and I was with him too, looking up and wondering. I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life.\(^\text{131}\)

What is striking to me about this period in retrospect is how invariable our lives seemed, that is, those privileged enough to sit in high-rises while the world outside suffered. I was not enchanted by how distinct each scene behind the windows seemed to be, but rather by the fact that they appeared no different from my own. We had all been rendered immobile and spent our days trying to keep busy or trying to remember what that even felt like. The sunset came to remind me that I’d

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made it through another day and gave me hope that the next day could be different. I mostly saw people watching TV, cooking, or pacing around their living rooms, activities that felt disturbingly familiar. My perception that we were all ultimately sharing the same experience made me feel more licensed to puncture these strangers’ sanctums. I understood myself as being simultaneously within and without. I had become a *voyeur* of the ordinary.

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The word voyeur is derived from the French verb “voir”, meaning “to see”, and can be translated directly to “one who sees”. The term voyeur is often tied in English to sexual deviance, defined in Merriam Webster’s dictionary as describing someone who “obtains sexual gratification from observing unsuspecting individuals who are partly undressed, naked, or engaged in sexual acts” or “a prying observer who is usually seeking the sordid or the scandalous”, with voyeurism describing the activity itself. In an age during which our daily activities are constantly being revealed and consumed by others via social media, reality television, and government surveillance, voyeurism has become a normalized cultural practice. When we emancipate the activity from its use in a sexual context, it can be utilized to describe our natural human desire to bear witness to the sanctums of others, that which goes on “behind closed doors.” There is, of course, a line between what constitutes a perverse kind of observation and an innocent one, though where that line is can certainly be subjective, and has become increasingly up for debate.
The “Armed” Voyeur: The Photography of Arne Svenson and Shizuka Yokomizo

We regard a man from behind, the fabric of his mauve t-shirt twisting and pooling where it meets the glass. His head is uncomfortably crooked into his right shoulder as if he is clutching a phone to his ear. A white curtain is pulled open, its edge just aligning with his forearm. Daylight floods in. The mullions of the window segment the composition into three parts, resembling the geometric works of Mondrian. The photograph is strikingly simple, though something about it feels off. We get the impression that we are looking at someone completely unaware that he is being looked at.

This photograph is one of many Arne Svenson took of strangers for his series The Neighbors in 2012. Equipped with a large telephoto lens he’d recently inherited from a friend, the photographer began obsessively observing and capturing the residents of a building across from his studio in Tribeca. The floor-to-ceiling windows forming the façade offered his gaze full access into each dwelling, and thus endless opportunities for subject matter. The act of sitting and waiting with his camera pointed out the window came to occupy the majority of his days that year. He likened himself to a contemporary L.B. Jeffries, the protagonist in Hitchcock’s Rear Window, watching the film four times that year alone. The violative nature of his photography, to him, was eclipsed by a belief that city-dwellers understand their privacy to be limited, one shared by a lawyer he consulted before beginning the project. Svenson’s project was an unabashed exercise in voyeurism.

There is something undeniably beautiful about the photographs that is mediated by their transgressive nature. The moments of quotidian life captured by Svenson convey a level of attentiveness seldom applied to the activities of strangers. In one, perhaps my favorite of the series, a woman is seated on a couch, the back of which is facing us twirling a lock of hair. A single lamp,
A Room with a View

residing just in front of the figure, illuminates the space with a dim, beige glow. At first, Svenson chose to focus his lens on the window panes themselves rather than the people behind them, causing some scenes to become adumbrated by the texture of the glass. The camera in this particular photograph is focused on the screen, casting the image in a softened and nebulous finish. The profound stillness of the scene seems to tell us “Hush, just look.”

The photographs operate as arguments for the quiet beauty of ordinary life, evoking an acute sense of recognition in the viewer. The distance between photographer and subject, and thus viewer and subject, allows for this beauty to be adequately perceived. The person in the photograph may not consider their household activities to be worth capturing (an image of you sitting on your couch beside a lamp is not necessarily one you’d rush to record). It is the photographer, in this case, one you are not aware of, who gives these moments meaning. Not unlike Baudelaire who projected his interpretations onto the scenes he observed through windows, Svenson turns each image into an open-ended narrative for the viewer to interpret for themselves through cropping. “What you don’t see is so much more powerful than what you do see,” Svenson said in a recent interview, “My job is to give you the opening sentence, and then you have to do the work. It's why cropping is so important. Crop out the thing that completes the story.”

In confining the edges of his images to those of the windows, he is emphasizing a sense of mystery that inherently exists when we perceive strangers. We are encouraged to forge a kind of shared identity with Svenson’s subject, to fill the gaps of these segmented narratives by drawing from private moments in our own lives. The identities of the subjects, which are largely protected in the compositions, are just fluid enough to make us feel inclined to empathize with them. “I am not photographing the residents as

specific, identifiable individuals, but as representatives of humankind,” Svenson said at the time, “In fact, I take great care in not revealing their identity; the strength of the imagery comes from us seeing ourselves in the anonymous figures of The Neighbors.”

What is significant about the photographs themselves and our reaction to them is that they reveal how we conceive of what constitutes a “private space”. As Svenson stated in a recent interview with the New York Times, “Many people think when they are in the confines of their home that the window is a wall. I came uninvited into the room. In an urban situation, we have these layers of filters that are stacked, like on the lens of a camera…Maybe you have zero filters for being at home.” We primarily view windows as a means to glimpse out into the world out of a space cut off by it or to illuminate interiors without exposing them to the elements of the outside world. What we often fail to consider, in urban settings in particular, is the fact that they offer others the power to puncture our private lives. Of course, we are not entirely naïve to this. The ubiquity of curtains and blinds as means to both control the amount of light invading a room and prevent others from seeing in suggests an awareness of this dual capability. The erosion of the boundary between public and private that the camera lens facilitates parallels that of the window.

In On Photography, Susan Sontag understands the camera as a device that transforms a person into “something active: a voyeur.” She expands on this further, writing that “Taking photographs has set up a chronic voyeuristic relation to the world.” This transformation into a voyeur that the camera incites is due to a disruption of a mutual relationship between photographer and subject. The camera allows the photographer to peer into and capture a stranger’s private life,

134 Lubow, “Were These Photographs Voyeurism or Art?”
much like the uncovered window, entirely without their knowledge. The photographer’s goal is to turn what is otherwise familiar or ordinary into something beautiful. The implication of this, however, is that photographers are inherently imposing standards onto their subjects, wielding the power to determine how we view them in their process of image-making.\textsuperscript{137} They decide

Arne Svenson, 'Neighbors #16', 2012
Arne Svenson, 'Neighbors #4', 2012
what it is about something that makes it interesting. Svenson’s project, and the public’s reaction to it, reflects this power imbalance that exists between the photographer and subject. Sontag writes “The camera is a kind of passport that annihilates moral boundaries and social inhibitions, freeing the photographer from any responsibility toward the people being photographed. The whole point of photographing people is that you are not intervening in their lives, only visiting them.”

Svenson’s naivety, or perhaps indifference, to the possible reactions of his subjects reflects Sontag’s notion of the obliteration of the responsibility of the photographer that the camera elicits.

Svenson’s project is voyeurism in the most literal sense of the word, but Sontag’s conception of the photographer begs the question: To what extent is every photographer a voyeur? Regardless of what you think about it ethically, it is undeniable that the unawareness of Svenson’s subjects to his camera in The Neighbors is precisely what makes such striking images. There is a significant difference between how we act when we are aware of being observed vs. when we are not, especially when we are at home. What is perhaps so disquieting about Svenson’s photographs is the way they force us to confront the fact that our privacy is never ensured. His subjects are captured in moments when they presumably believed themselves to be completely alone and invisible to the outside. As one commenter put it, under a story about the exhibition that appeared in the Tribeca Citizen, “We can’t close our blinds all day long and stay sane, so we pray our neighbors are decent enough to leave us alone.”

To what extent do we retain the right to privacy in an environment characterized by constant interaction with the public? In my voyeuristic pursuits, the sheer number of windows and the fact that I could so easily peer into them alleviated some of the guilt I felt about violating my

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138 Sontag, On Photography, 41.
neighbors’ privacy. Svenson’s nor my activities denote a perverse mode of observation, that is, an interest in the sordid or prurient, yet the power imbalance between viewer and subject makes them inherently transgressive. Just because we can look in, does that mean we have the right to? A window’s transparency penetrates the boundaries of the inside/outside worlds we occupy and view as being intrinsically separate, which begs the question of to what extent are we consenting to being watched by, say, keeping our curtains open. The morally complex nature of voyeurism arises from our cultural norms of in what moments our right to privacy is most justified. Most people, for example, know that watching people having sex without their knowledge is ethically reprehensible. We know we should tune out a couple engaged in a heated argument across from us on the subway, but something within us cannot help but eavesdrop. We might share this with a fellow witness who casts a glance our way as if to say, “Are you also hearing this?” A common phrase used when viewing something we shouldn’t be is “It’s like a car crash, you can’t help but look!” Does this unspoken code of conduct apply when observing the ordinary, when we view others not as individuals but as representations of ourselves? “There is something on people’s faces when they don’t know they are being observed that never appears when they do,” Sontag writes, “their expressions are private ones, not those they would offer to the camera.”\(^\text{140}\) We cannot see the faces of the subjects in Svenson’s photographs, however, they still convey a sense of privation that would not exist if they were aware of the camera. What happens then when a subject, still protected by the window pane, consents to the invasion of a photographer in their private sphere? …

Between 1998 and 2000, the photographer Shizuka Yokomizo embarked on a different kind of voyeuristic pursuit in which her subjects consented to be photographed. By dropping letters

\(^{140}\) Sontag, *On Photography*, 37
in the mailboxes of unsuspecting strangers, she hoped to capture images of people through their windows. The project spanned across continents, with Yokomizo choosing potential subjects based on their residences, often ground-floor apartments that she had visited beforehand.\textsuperscript{141} Then she waited, anxious and impatient for the shoot date to come. “Dear Stranger,” her letter begins, “I would like to photograph you standing in your front room from the street in the evening. A camera will be set outside the window on the street. If you do not mind being photographed, please stand in the room and look into the camera through the window for 10 minutes on __/__/__:__pm.”\textsuperscript{142} If they chose not to participate, the strangers were asked to draw their curtains during the indicated date and time. Before the photograph was exhibited, subjects were sent a print and Yokomizo’s contact information if they took issue with their image being publicized.\textsuperscript{143} The photographs were taken in the evening when the subjects and their rooms were most visible to Yokomizo.

The resulting photographs are at once submissive and confrontational. Yokomizo’s request that the subjects face her directly has the effect of making us feel that they are looking right back at us, accentuating the window’s dual properties. Sitting in the dark, with her camera pointed outwards, Yokomizo is almost invisible to her subjects. Just the shadow of a stranger crouched in the urban darkness. “I positioned myself in a place where I could be replaced by the viewer,” Yokomizo told Takashi Homma in an interview in 2016, “In this sense, I think that the sense of distance that I felt from the subjects will be the same even for someone other than me who looks at them.”\textsuperscript{144} We feel at once profoundly close and distant from the subjects, aware of one another’s presence but maintaining our separateness by way of the window pane. Yokomizo wrote her


\textsuperscript{143} Barry Schwabsky, "Shizuka Yokomizo" \textit{Artforum International}, vol. 39, no. 8, (April 2001).

\textsuperscript{144} Homma and Yokomizo, “The Origin of the Idea”.

address on the letters in case the subjects wished to write back to her. One told her of how they’d felt this dichotomy during the shoot. “It felt strangely fictional in a way because we both appeared to each other with the window between us. I would emerge out of the dark, and they would also emerge on the other side of the window. There was something theatrical about it all,” Yokomizo told Homma. The interaction was, quite literally, an act of pulling back the curtains. The phantasmagoric membrane that veils urban life is momentarily lifted, facilitating a kind of intimacy between strangers that is seldom possible otherwise.

What makes the ensuing images so compelling is what is revealed to us about their subjects. In contrast to a typical portrait, which emphasizes close physical proximity to the subject, Yokomizo’s images emphasize the distance between the viewer and the subject by the inclusion of the window. We are being invited to look in, but not to enter. The window gives the subjects a greater sense of autonomy that informs how they respond to a stranger’s gaze. Yokomizo has granted them the power to compose themselves, allowing the entry of the unexpected into her compositions. In one photograph, taken in Japan, a woman stands in her main room with her hands grasped gently at her waist. The room’s contents are carefully organized, its structure characterized by sharp angles from wooden supports that run along the walls. A vintage clock and a small jar of purple flowers sit on a wooden shelf behind her. On the floor beneath them, there is a white geisha doll in a glass case. A glare in the upper right-hand corner is the sole indication of the glass separating the viewer and the subject. A fluorescent light casts a blinding glow on the left side of her body, painting her black hair with shimmering streaks of white. She is strikingly still, and her gaze, which meets ours, is laden with a quiet apprehensiveness. She appears hesitant but curious, unsure how to respond to being observed. However, the very fact that she consented to be

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145 Homma and Yokomizo, “The Origin of the Idea”.
photographed perhaps reveals a certain level of ambivalence towards being seen. She is not the kind of person who would necessarily seek it out, maybe, but presented with the opportunity, she's decided to take it.
In another, taken through a window divided by three mullions, a man stands in his living room with a phone to his ear. He wears baggy white boxers and a gray sweatshirt, standing in contrapposto with a hand on his lower back. He too makes direct eye contact with his observer, his mouth forming a smirk as if he’s saying “Can you believe this?” to the person on the other end of the line. The room has been designed in a Victorian style; textured red wallpaper covers the walls, upon which Impressionist paintings, in decorative gold frames, have been evenly hung. The space is warm, even inviting, in mood. He responds to Yokomizo’s observation nonchalantly, conducting himself exactly as he would if he didn’t think anyone was watching.

The fact that the project was conducted across a variety of countries made Yokomizo more attentive to how the actual architecture of these buildings conveyed larger cultural attitudes towards the relationship between public and private. “The windows in Europe and America clearly demarcate their own territory and present this to the public. Even the decorations of the windows are clearly oriented to the public” Yokomizo told Homma, “In the case of Japan, when I walk in the streets of Tokyo and see things like potted plants spilling out into the street, it seems like the personalities, or presences, of the residents are spilling out into the public realm.” The fluidity of the latter articulates, to Yokomizo, a universally shared sense of mutual consideration. This contrasts a Western attitude towards spaces, both public and private, more oriented around personal entitlement, a mentality that one retains the right to use a space as one pleases. These varying attitudes also manifested themselves in how passersby reacted to her camera setup. In places like New York, where windows are often enclosed in bars, people felt compelled to ask what exactly it was she was doing there. However, in England, where windows are both more visible, she was ignored and or actively avoided by those passing her in the street.

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146 Homma and Yokomizo, “The Origin of the Idea”.
The opening of Yokomizo’s letter presents a contradiction: how can one be at once a stranger and dear? The impetus behind Yokomizo’s project was the alienation and estrangement she felt when visiting or living in foreign countries. “I felt this sense of separation in being able to see what was happening inside the buildings from outside while not actually being in them myself. This overlapped with my feeling of being out of place in that foreign culture” she told Homma. The feeling of alienation, experienced in urban environments in particular, is an objectively common one. The paradox of being at once surrounded by others yet feeling profoundly alone is highlighted in Yokomizo’s photography. Voyeurism offers the solitary city-dweller a means to achieve a more universalist view of the world around them while affirming their feeling of isolation. “I take photographs as a way of confirming my own existence,” Yokomizo told Homma, “When I shot Stranger, too, I chose the medium of photography because it allowed me to visualize my perspective and I wanted to confirm my own existence and verify the state of my being in those places.”

Despite her subjects’ complicity in their production, the images in the Stranger series still place us in the position of a voyeur, we remain separate from the private by way of the window between us. Viewing them, the feeling that we are observing something we perhaps shouldn’t be persists, despite the subjects having consented to being captured by Yokomizo’s camera.

The windows themselves became a device to maintain some amount of distance between her and her subjects, offering her a glimpse into others’ lives without altering their status as strangers. Sontag writes that “Aesthetic distance seems built into the very experience of looking at photographs.” The window acts as a secondary lens between viewer and subject, intensifying this distance while still maintaining a degree of intimacy. The window ensured that both subject and photographer felt safe to a certain degree. “I think if I had stood in front of them holding the

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147 Homma and Yokomizo, “The Origin of the Idea”.
camera, they would have become weaker, or I would have put myself in the more powerful position. However, by having those windows between us, they felt protected.” Yokomizo told Homma.\(^{149}\) This deduction reflects Svenson’s view that most people tend to see windows as walls, solid barriers between the public and the private. In Yokomizo’s case, the subject’s decision to participate was perhaps in part because this boundary existed between them. For Svenson’s subjects, their lack of complicity meant that their windows became threats to their right to privacy. However, in both projects, the images themselves constitute the entire interaction; neither photographer spoke with their subjects during the artistic process. It is an entirely visual narrative, meaning the viewer can both project assumptions upon and identify with the subjects. The time-consuming nature of early photography required subjects to sit for the photograph; the consent of the subject, if not their explicit request to be photographed, was essential to the image-making process. This dynamic was threatened as photography became an instantaneous action, with the advent of faster exposure times, negatives, and the halftone process, which allowed photographs to be published in newspapers.\(^{150}\) The lack of direct interaction between Yokomizo and Svenson and their subjects reflects the shift in the photographer-subject relationship that occurred as photography advanced. The portable camera ended the necessity of a subject having to consent to the immortalization of their image. Our experience of viewing Svenson and Yokomizo’s images is radically different from our experience of viewing a traditional portrait due to our awareness that the subjects are being captured “off-guard.” What makes Svenson’s images compelling is that we are witnessing the behavior of people in a sphere we are supposed to be excluded from as members of the “public.” Yokomizo’s images, despite the subjects’ authorization to be photographed, are captivating because they embody a similar puncturing of the private by the

\(^{149}\) Homma and Yokomizo, “The Origin of the Idea”.

\(^{150}\) Keizer, Privacy, 15.
public. Both projects reflect an issue at the core of modern experience: the possibility of privacy in a period during which it is increasingly threatened by our technology.


When Svenson’s series was first exhibited at the Julie Saul Gallery in 2013, he was confronted with a torrent of furor. The preservation of their anonymity was beside the point to his subjects, who felt that he had committed a substantive violation of their privacy. Two of Svenson’s subjects, a couple with two young children, filed a lawsuit against him on the grounds that he had photographed them without consent and of their and their children’s privacy, a violation of the New York State Right of Publicity statute, which prohibits the use of a person’s likeness or essence for commercial purposes without written consent.151 Svenson took down the photograph in question, which features a mother holding her daughter, and excluded it from a later published book of the series. The New York Supreme Court ruled in Svenson’s favor in August of that year, concluding that “because [Svenson’s] use of the images in question constituted artwork and thus is not deemed for ‘use for advertising or trade purposes,’ within the meaning of the statute,”152 In the wake of the Snowden leaks that coincided with the exhibition, Svenson’s photographs became surrogates for increasing anxieties around privacy. In a recent interview with The New York Times, Svenson reflects on the series and its implications, saying “A lot of artists, and I think it’s a gift, are completely oblivious to the consequences of their actions. If I ever thought of what their reactions would be, I somehow thought they would be pleased.”153

We have entered an age that threatens privacy as we know it. The projects of both Yokomizo and Svenson engage with greater anxiety felt in contemporary culture towards the

153 Lubow, “Were These Photos Voyeurism or Art?”
ubiquity of surveillance due to their intrusion into the private life lived behind a glass window. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes writes, “Each photograph is read as the private appearance of its referent: the age of Photography corresponds precisely to the explosion of the private into the public, or rather into the creation of a new social value, which is the publicity of the private: the private is consumed as such, publicly.”¹⁵⁴ Barthes is identifying a key characteristic of modernity: the dissolution of the barrier between public and private. The “age of Photography” we now find ourselves in has reflected and informed our feelings regarding privacy, our anxieties in an era deemed “the end of privacy”. The uniqueness of Svenson and Yokomizo’s projects is in the way they explicitly penetrate the private realms of their subjects. They have publicized the private in a literal sense, presenting the viewer with slices of strangers’ lives we would not otherwise have access to unless we are also prone to voyeurism.

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At the sound of a car or motorcycle, my two roommates rush to peer out of our living room windows and onto the street below. With their eyes peeking out from behind the window fan, they watch a face-off ensue between one of my roommate's exes (our next-door neighbor) and her current boyfriend, the latter sitting in the driver’s seat with his lights on, pointed straight at the former who hugs a turquoise motorcycle. The two boys maintain their relative positions for far longer than it takes to pull out of a parking spot, each one seemingly waiting for the other to go first. They finally both leave, after what feels like five minutes but was likely only two, and my roommate tracks her current boyfriend on “Find My Friends” to see if he is following her ex somewhere. The moment breathed excitement into an otherwise typical night; it was like watching

a play, all of us rendered immobile by an opportunity to witness the unexpected. Casual instances of voyeurism, such as this one, offer a respite from the monotony of our habitual days. Weeks after we’d first moved in, I remember pulling one of them aside to watch our neighbor scrolling through his phone in bed, curtains open fully and lights on, from our dark kitchen. She said something along the lines of “I bet in about five minutes he’ll start masturbating or something”, and indeed, about five minutes later, she called me yelling: “OLLIE I JUST SAW HIS PENIS!”.

On the anonymous social media platform “Yik Yak”, we had our address revealed by a well-meaning passerby. They had witnessed through our windows my two roommates dancing in their underwear on the stripper pole they’d installed in our living room and written for all to see “Whoever was practicing pole dancing (with the curtains open) across the street from taste Budds is absolutely iconic”. I found their parenthetical somewhat patronizing, as if the fact that our curtains were open vindicated the voyeur from having violated some aspect of our privacy (I did not, in the moment, consider all the times I rationalized my own acts of voyeurism, if only internally, with the same reasoning). Their endorsement of my roommates’ “exhibitionism” (deeming them “absolutely iconic”) did not assuage my maternalistic concerns for their safety. It was the first time I’d been confronted with absolute verification that people could see into my home with the same clarity that I could see them on the street. And it was terrifying. I remember the contrast between my concern for this obvious violation of our privacy and the indifference towards it my roommates displayed, even though they had been the ones subjected to the voyeur’s gaze. I was worried about potential stalkers or the possibility of their identification, protective over both themselves and I, and wondered if we would become subjected to our own “window-gawkers”. It wasn’t the poster I was afraid of, rather it was the thirty-two strangers who had
“upvoted” the post, a rare level of engagement on the platform that flattered my roommates but horrified me.

But nothing malicious ensued. Our days carried on as they had before, our curtains stayed open in the evenings, and my roommates continued their pole dancing in full view of any who walked by. A few weeks later, I met the original anonymous poster, who turned out to be a coworker of mine I only knew in passing. I can’t remember if I had brought it up while they were in earshot, or vice-versa, but I remember the way their face flushed when they realized it had been my house that they’d posted about. In my confrontation with our harmless peeper, I expressed that while we appreciated their flattery, they maybe shouldn’t have included our address in their post. They apologized, I told them it was fine, we laughed about it, and carried on with the remainder of our shift.

I acknowledge the contradictory nature of my reactions towards voyeurism. How we feel towards the window ultimately depends on whether we are in front of or behind it, whether we are in the position of power as the viewer, or the one vulnerable to being viewed. The other day our neighbor from across our yard, who we’ve never met, stared intently at me getting into my car with an indecipherable grin plastered on his face. I convinced myself that his reaction had something to do with the fact that my rear bedroom window, covered by a fairly transparent curtain, was in a direct line of sight from his house. I interpreted his ambiguous smile and the persistence of his gaze as a reaction to being near someone he’d watched dress and undress numerous times without their knowledge. Perhaps it is my natural tendency to interpret men as being inherently malicious that leads me to interpret a smile as a threat, and my own voyeuristic inclinations that make me hyper-conscious of being viewed, that brings about these conclusions. One of the more terrifying memories of my childhood is being repeatedly waved at, from behind
a nail salon’s glass facade, by a strange man. I remember his persistence, how I hid behind the table of drying fans hoping he’d go away, only to find my eyes meeting his again each time I peeked out to check if he was still there. He continued knocking and grimacing at me, patronizing my attempts to avoid his gaze. He eventually left, and a few minutes later, I grasped my mother’s hand tightly and smeared her still-drying nails, pulling her behind me as I rushed back to our house.

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I cannot say that I am an advocate for or against the act of voyeurism. I have occupied the seats of both immobile observer and oblivious subject, known the thrill of looking and the fear that comes from being looked at. So, I will leave it up to you to form your own opinion on the matter. What I am interested in, ultimately, is the complex nature of privacy violations in the context of contemporary life, and the extent to which the window threatens our perceived conceptions of public and private spaces. I am curious as to whether our willingness to publicize our private lives over social media has made us feel simultaneously more entitled to violating others’ privacy and more anxious about the possibility of them violating ours. We have downplayed the reality of constant government surveillance by making memes about a fictional “FBI agent” assigned to watching our digital movements, who reminds us to go to sleep when they catch us binging Sex and the City for the fifth time or tells us that when it’s a bad idea to text our ex. Our appetite for reality TV has become near-insatiable since shows like The Real World and the aptly-titled Big Brother first aired in the mid-nineties (750 reality TV shows aired in 2015 alone – 83 percent more than the number of scripted shows on cable that year. Studies have shown that 52 percent of Americans watch at least one episode of reality TV every week). Social media exemplifies an

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entirely new mode of surveillance carried out by both users and tech companies, in which most of
our engagement with the outside world takes place from the comfort of our homes. We have
become a nation of voyeurs. Yet we have never been lonelier. In a 2023 survey conducted by
Gallup, 17 percent of American adults reported that they had felt lonely the majority of the day
prior, an estimated 44 million people. Other recent Gallup research estimates that over 300 million
people worldwide don’t have a single friend, around 3.9 percent of the global population.157
The paradox of living in a world purported to be more connected than ever before is that we feel
increasingly disconnected from it. Gazing through glass windows has been replaced by gazing at
virtual ones. Most people’s initial assumptions when I tell them the subject of this project is that I
am writing about Microsoft Windows, proof that our primary associations with windows are now
the digital ones we interact with daily. While we once gazed out of glass windows to affirm reality
and feel connected to the external world, we now find our eyes glued to the screens that present us
with augmented ones. Instagram is the modern-day display window: a carefully curated
presentation of our lives that we hope will provoke admiration, envy, or even a sense of relatedness
in others. Seeing the intimate lives of the rich and famous that we aspire to may prompt us to buy
all the products they advertise, to grasp some of a lifestyle that is ultimately out of our reach.
Sontag wrote in 2001, “Indeed in our contemporary, image-saturated culture, in which we have
unlimited access to photographs, we have become “image-junkies”.158 Her claim has only
increased in relevance in the past two decades since On Photography was published, and I wonder
what she would have to say about us now, an army of camera-wielding voyeurs with a rapacious
desire for more things to look at.

158 Sontag, On Photography, 22.
Epilogue

Composing is a house of windows. *Hundreds of rooms; each room is a theater, an aquarium, a glass showcase; the interior remains mysterious and window is the Norse word for the wind’s eye.*

Brenda Coulta, “The Growing Hour”
There are many things I learned in my research that did not end up making it into this project. In Ancient Mesopotamia, for instance, a common motif was an image of the goddess of windows and fertility, Kililu, gazing out of a window, symbolizing the link between the human world and the divine.\textsuperscript{159} I originally intended to write about the American painter Andrew Wyeth’s numerous paintings of windows, the many works of literature that utilize the window as a symbol, the advent of tinted windows, and the reasons behind Microsoft Windows’s name. But ultimately, I feel I have provided you with a comprehensive account of the window, that includes the various reasons behind my enduring interest in them.

I did not originally set out to spend the past nine months up to my neck in research about the window. My initial idea for this project was to write about the broader concept of home. But as I contemplated my relationships to the various places I’ve called home over the past twenty-two years, my mind kept returning to the window. I thought of those innumerable evenings my ex-boyfriend’s mother and I spent staring out at upper Manhattan from their windows, considering how lucky we were that the stars had aligned so that all of us could be together. I thought of the darkness of my childhood bedrooms, the various views I have beheld from my college ones, of the enduring magic of holiday window displays and the new developments constructed on foundations that once held my favorite stores and restaurants. Over the past five years homes have come and gone; The last time I was in my ex-boyfriend’s Upper West Side apartment was Thanksgiving 2022, a day before I ended our relationship. My mother left the city and sold our apartment in 2020, my father moved to Texas halfway through my senior year of high school. In my short life

\textsuperscript{159} Jütte, “Window Gazes”, 616.
I have known both love and heartbreak, the pleasure of solitude and the pain of loneliness. But amidst all of these unmitigated changes, I have found solace in windows; in waking up and seeing snow gently falling outside, walking on the edge of the North Sea and finding houses aglow, in catching glimpse of the interior lives of strangers in buildings across the street, and hearing cheers echo across Manhattan as the sun sets.

The window is the site of imagination, longing, and connection. We stare out of or into it in contemplation, reminded that there is a world beyond us in perpetual motion. The dreamer may find possibility, the artist inspiration, the recluse connection, and the prisoner hope. Its functions: to provide light, fresh air, and views, fulfill needs far beyond the biological. To me, the window is a device to engender a deeper understanding of the world around me, to connect me with reality when my sense of it is lost.

Windows frame our lives. I wonder now if his neighbors bore witness to all of my ex-boyfriend and I’s most precious moments; if they watched us dancing to Khurangbin in his bedroom, drawing at his kitchen counter, or playing beer pong with his parents before a two-week quarantine turned into a months-long one. If they watched through his hallway window all our exhilarating arrivals and devastating departures, and if they could feel any of our joy or heartache.

“Windows in a building are the most interesting thing in America,” wrote Gertrude Stein in Everybody’s Autobiography. And if you were to ask me why this is true, I could tell you that window is the Norse word for ‘wind’s-eye’, that there are 4.6 million windows in Manhattan, and that there is a word for throwing someone out of a window, and that that word is defenestration. But instead of recounting facts I would ask to imagine all the windows in your home replaced with bricks. And then, I hope, you would agree.
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