



1 Author Annmarie Adams in her childhood room, London, Ontario, Canada. It is typical of middle-class girls' bedrooms in North American houses in this period.

In 1971 my older brother Paul took a Kodachrome slide (Illustr. 1) of me in my bedroom in London, Ontario, Canada. I was eleven years old and my room was a true showcase of my treasured objects, carefully arranged for display. On the dresser was *The Partridge Family Album*, released the previous year, a red clock my accountant father had brought me back from a business trip to Switzerland; a clown piggy bank, a recent birthday gift from my friend Marina; a musical Christmas angel sent from my aunt Rita who lived in northern Ontario; and an assortment of Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys mystery books which I often swapped with my friends. These beloved objects punctuated the spaces above and between the white and gold painted furnishings of my girlish room. The textiles in the room were less motley than my various treasures and thoroughly color coordinated. The flouncy canopy and the quilted bedspread were made of the same floral fabric; the gathered double bed skirt was pale pink; the pale green of the shag rug matched the green stems and leaves in the bed linens perfectly. My family had moved into this four-bedroom house in 1969; in our old house my room had been simpler, a red and white striped spread on the single bed with wicker furniture, including a headboard. The room had a red linoleum floor – no shag rug.

I remember disliking this new pink room intensely – I preferred the primary colors of my old room and the „supergraphics“ printed on my clothing over the pink floral pattern. My mother, however, loved it. The previous owners' daughter had had a canopy bed and matching set in this same room and I think the image stuck with her. My mother desperately wanted me to love it too, for nine years, until the bed and matching furniture were given to her friend's grand-daughter (who loved it, of course). The difference in our responses to the same bedroom at the same time is a reminder of how a designer's vision is not a fact, but rather a mere suggestion for users, who may inhabit spaces in very distinct ways.<sup>1</sup>

This article explores children's bedrooms in the second half of the twentieth century and their importance as sites of conflict over so-called gender identity, looking especially at how gender identity is expressed in design. In addition, I am interested in how understanding the bedrooms of children whose gender identity does not seem to be fixed, fixes on the other sex, or whose preferences do not match traditional concepts of gender may help us to see more clearly the role of material culture (not just architectural features) in gender identity. What is the relationship between ideal and real bedrooms?

My room in suburban Canada reflected quite closely the trends of the time for girls' bedrooms, with a time delay of only a few years. Although my mother was clearly inspired by the girl's room she saw when she first visited the house, she may have also been influenced by popular media, as several of the themes characterizing my own space were frequently illustrated in widely-circulating decorating magazines for women such as *House Beautiful*. Indeed, the November 1964 issue featured a similar girl's room (Illustr. 2) with flouncy fabrics, deep pile rug, floral wall paper, and excessive patterns. A canopy bed is at the center and the image suggests the idea that the room is a tasteful „gift“ from mother to daughter.

Today, 46 years later, our association of girls with pink remains so strong that it seems entrenched and permanent. Since World War II, the use of gender-coded décor (especially pink and blue) has been unchanging in children's bedrooms, remaining present even through important changes in trends to their size, location, luxuriousness, contents/technologies and emphasis on privacy. But despite the continuing association between girlhood and pink, the pink/blue code is relatively recent in its origins. One of the ways cultural codes become stabilized is by being repeated in popular magazines and in the material practices of clothing and bedrooms, even if it incites resistance, like my room. One aim of this research, therefore, is to test the stability of a prescribed gender code in real children's rooms.

The traditional tools of architectural history (plans, elevations) are inadequate for this project because the expression of gendered identity usually happens after the architect, builder, or decorator leaves the site and the family moves in, applying paint and wallpaper and choosing curtains, rugs, furniture, bedding, and toys/gadgets. Not only are these things ephemeral, but the sources we normally rely upon to capture ephemeral furnishings – period photographs – don't always capture color, which is key to understanding how gender identity is expressed.

Another difficulty is the question of agency, as parents control many aspects of the decorating process, while also often controlling how their decorating choices are re-



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2 This advertisement for Ethan Allen furniture appeared in *House Beautiful* in November 1964. It illustrates widespread trends for girls' rooms: floral matching fabrics, white painted furniture sets, thick carpet, and generous places to showcase personal objects.

corded. Given that many children today have quite a bit of influence in the decoration of their rooms, we might expect fewer conflicts. However, the bedroom remains a site of tension about the construction of gender identity: who decides, who controls the presentation of these decisions and what form that public image of the child's bedroom will take.

**The history of pink and the history of bedrooms** According to social historians, before World War II and especially around the time of World War I, pink was reserved for boys, while blue was for girls. The Nazis changed everything, including color conventions. They used an inverted pink triangle to identify homosexuals, part of a complex color coding system that also included political prisoners, criminals and even the introverted.<sup>2</sup> After World War II pink was clearly associated with girls and strongly avoided for boys. By the 1950s, newborns were labeled immediately as boys or girls by blue or pink blankets or beds.<sup>3</sup> This custom continues in North American urban hospitals today. Seconds after birth, before we are even named, we are categorized by gender and from therein this descriptor informs every detail of our lives, including many of our material choices. The use of the code in hospitals may stem from the use of the code in the home. What seems to be a private individual expression of gender identity (in the bedroom) may actually be a public social expression of gender ideals, akin to the code's repetition in *House Beautiful* and other normative sources.

The design of children's bedrooms, however, has changed drastically since that time. A survey of the magazine *The House Beautiful* reveals rich information about the place of the bedroom in 1960s middle-class culture.<sup>4</sup> In plan, postwar family bedrooms occupy a separate, „night time“ zone in the house with smaller children's rooms clustered near the parents' room, the ubiquitous Master bedroom suite.<sup>5</sup> Baby-boom kids shared a bathroom, accessible from the internal circulation system (often a double-loaded corridor), while parents had their own en suite bath, sometimes framed by multiple and/or walk-in closets, like in a hotel. Experts in the 1960s believed that children developed their personalities by spending quiet time in their own rooms and expressing their personal tastes in material ways (for example, through posters, music, and décor) but remaining close to their parents: „Many homes are designed with the young family in mind, and the rooms for children are put where they can be closely supervised by the parents,“ wrote Curtis Besinger in *House Beautiful*, April 1960.<sup>6</sup>

As I have described in a focused study of an Eichler-designed suburban home in Marin County, California, Dr Spock-style mothering meant the kitchen was a sort of command post. Having the parents' room near the kids, too, meant that mothers could hear

children if they called out during the night.<sup>7</sup> My own mother always said that she slept with her eyes closed but her ears open. The architects of Eichler houses positioned the parents' room as a threshold to the bedroom-only zone, an arrangement that would be unthinkable in later houses. As in the pre World War II period, children were separated by age and gender, but since there were more children born during the Baby Boom after the war, rooms were typically shared.<sup>8</sup>

Mothers were mostly responsible for the furnishing and décor of children's bedrooms in the 1960s. Girls' rooms were frequently decorated in soft pastel colors including pink. Floral patterns or other themes deemed appropriately feminine set the tone of girls' rooms, while their brothers' rooms might be decorated in primary colors, with blue a particularly popular choice. Sports and animals were popular themes for boys. Gender expression extended far beyond themes and colors, however, also determining furniture/closets and shaping gendered behavior. An article in *House Beautiful* on closet design in October 1962 addressed this difference head on. Girls' closets should have small sections to hold „dainty clothes“, while ideal boys' closets were the exact opposite, with open spaces. According to design experts, this difference was because boys „won't fuss over fitting things in neatly.“

It is impossible to know how many children would have been interested or willing to choose their own room décor had their mothers been willing to share this responsibility. As children grew into teenagers in the postwar period, however, they likely took more control of their bedroom interiors. The hanging of posters featuring popular music stars, for example, was a way teenagers of both genders expressed their personal interests and perhaps resisted the childhood rooms shaped by their mothers. The rise of rock and roll music in the 1960s, for example, had a tremendous impact on teenagers' bedrooms with the mass production of music posters, album covers, and affordable stereo systems.

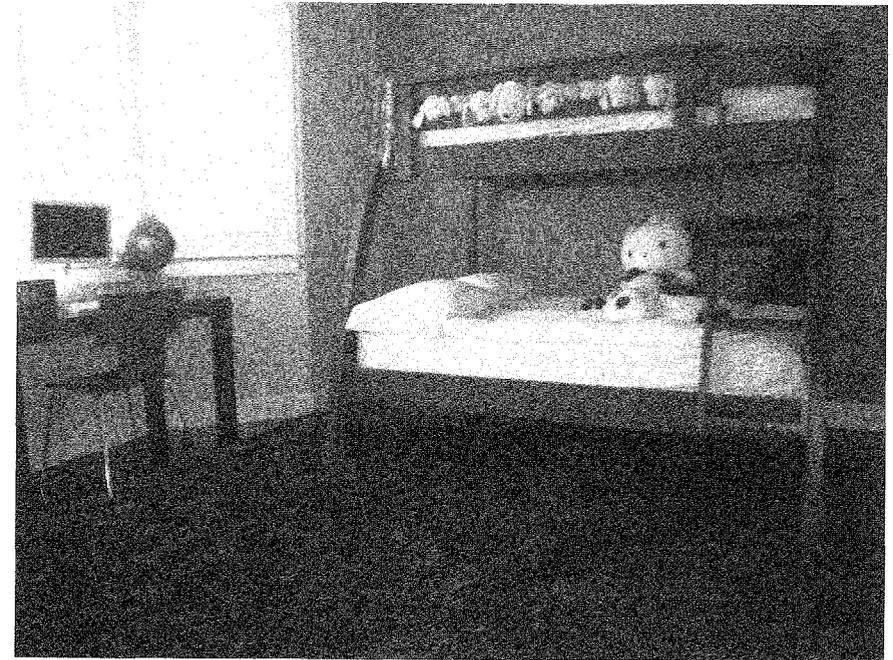
Looking at *House Beautiful* also tells us that middle-class houses after 1980 were quite different from those designed in the previous two decades. Generation X kids' rooms were larger, spread out, and rarely shared.<sup>9</sup> Children living in houses built in the 1980s and 1990s even had their own bathrooms and colors for girls sometimes varied from the standard pink. Parents *born* in the baby boom are more likely than their own parents to give their children a say in decorating their rooms. Most importantly, perhaps due to the influence of urban loft living and the rise of boutique hotels, children's bedrooms became luxurious worlds of their own with a pronounced separation from their parents' room. Plans published in *House Beautiful* illustrate a new emphasis on children's isolation and luxury, linked to independence and self-reliance, as indicated in this quote from 1998.

„A child's room is a small world: a home base for travel dreams, whether book- or computer-generated or completely imaginary; a perfect parlor in which to host playmates; a sanctuary to retreat to when the comfort of teddy bears is needed.“<sup>10</sup>

My sense from the magazines and from personal experience is that children's spaces became much more contested in this post-1980 period. While my generation had little say over the decoration of our rooms, that is, many university students today recall collaborating with their mothers (in some cases both parents) about the ways their childhood rooms were furnished and decorated. I have several speculative explanations for this change. One possibility is that while most middle-class mothers worked at home in the 1960s, the next generation of mothers worked outside the home. Mothers of the 1960s, then, likely saw the arrangement of rooms in their homes as part of their „work“, while women twenty years later mothers tended to see house decoration as a leisure activity and an opportunity even to collaborate with their children. Certainly popular retailers such as IKEA (first stores outside Sweden 1973; 1975 in North America) play into this notion of do-it-yourself furnishing as „fun.“ We might argue, then, that children's bedrooms of this period are rich evidence of the impact of second-wave feminism on family life and values by relieving women of this responsibility and making interior design a family affair.

Children's rooms post-1980 were also a place of escape for children, becoming almost like electronic caves. After about 1985 (Nintendo released 1985; Game Boy 1989), children had elaborate video and computer equipment in their rooms, often spending hours there communicating with total strangers.<sup>11</sup> A study in 2003 found 61% of children had TV's in their rooms (35% had video games).<sup>12</sup> The average British child in 2007 had \$2500 worth of electronic gear in his or her room, a stark contrast to the modest sleeping/reading spaces provided for kids in the 1960s and 1970s where a clock-radio was likely to be the most expensive electronic item.<sup>13</sup>

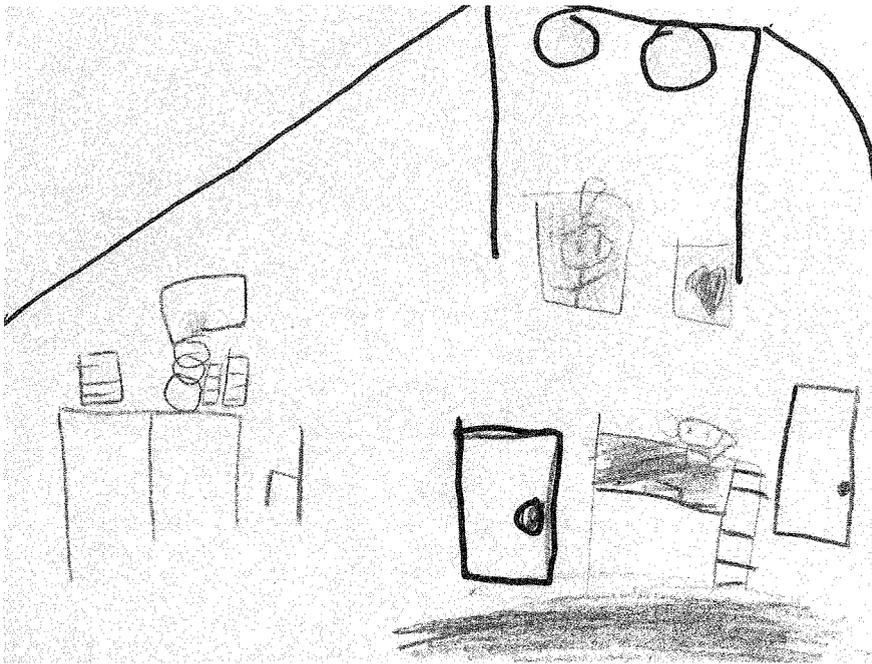
**Gender identity/variance** What happens when we follow so-called gender-variant kids into the bedroom? Six-year old Max, who lives in suburban California, wishes his room were more like his younger sister's, Rosie. „He doesn't say he hates his room,“ confesses Max and Rosie's mother, „but often says ‚when we change my room‘ or ‚if we re-change my room‘ and then says what he wants.“ His 46-year old mother, Kim, recognizes the power of architecture in Max's expression of his preference for girl's things: „In retrospect I wish I had worked a little harder with Max to help him select things he liked for his room, however as we were moving we were also just discovering Max's gender confusion (he's



3 Six-year old Max wishes his room were more like his sister's girlish room.

not confused really, it was just more of the fact that he opened up some of these feelings to me more directly simultaneous with our decorating the house).“<sup>14</sup> In the end, it has to remain open what „gender confusion“ might mean in this case.

Max's room (Illustr. 3 and 4) is a perfect real-world example of the trends revealed in the *House Beautiful* survey of kids' rooms since 1980. It's very generous – it has its own bathroom – and its focus is a set of modernist, metal bunk beds, supplemented with cool stuff like a Mac desktop and designer posters. The wall color is teal blue with a red world map painted by a local artist. Like many children's drawings of architectural interiors, Max's drawing of his room is a charming montage of viewpoints which simulates the real, three-dimensional experience of the room in an effective, nearly filmic way. His bunk beds with a stuffed animal on the top bunk, wall map, and bright red carpet are clearly featured; his computer desk and chair are to the left of the beds, slightly raised above the floor and surrounded by windows with blinds. The intersection of the walls and ceiling is clearly depicted and the two recessed lights are coloured yellow to show their illumination. The doors to the hallway and bathroom, however, would not normally appear in this view, as



4 Max's drawing of his room from 2010 shows his gender-neutral bunkbeds, stuffed animals, and desk.

they are actually behind the drawing child. Note his closet does not appear in the drawing. Likewise Max's posters are drawn above the bed while they are in reality on another wall. Still, the drawing gives a remarkably accurate account of the room's contents and its limits.

The contents of Max's room are less typical for boys and illustrate one strategy children use to manage the conflicts from their end: gentle subversion. He has a Hello Kitty stuffed doll; rows of spare dogs on upper bunk. Max's collection of clothing designed for girls and Chinese clothes are proudly displayed in his closet, which he showed me right away on a recent visit.<sup>15</sup> Max and Rosie have a generous second-floor playroom that they share too, which sits between their two rooms. Rosie also has her own bathroom too and all three rooms have expansive closets. In comparison to her brother's, Rosie's room is very girlish, with a white pink and gold-trimmed bed, pink shag rug, patterned wallpaper.

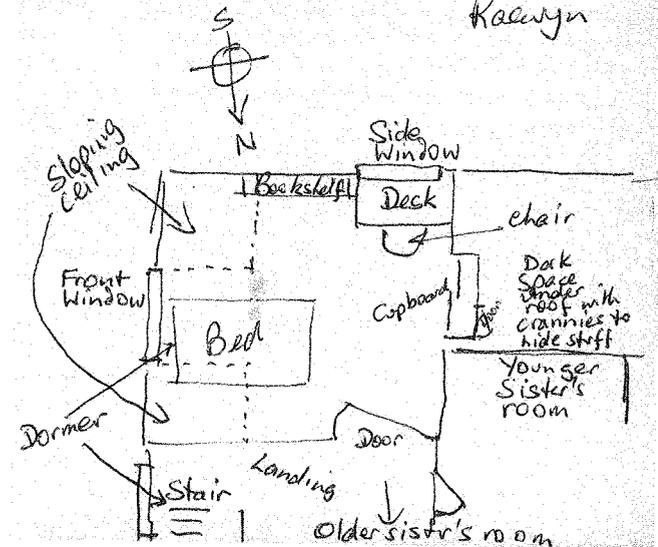
A common coping strategy before about 1980, I speculate, was to avoid gender coding by creating secret spaces. In this remarkable sketch plan (Illustr. 5) mailed to me

Hi Annmarie

3/6

Here is a plan of my room from adolescence. I have thought of another aspect. The window marked FW (front window) was a dormer window; I could climb out of it at night, & a few times did so, so I could go walking in the open air wearing a skirt, which was a great relief!

Best wishes  
Raewyn



5 Sociologist Raewyn (formerly Robert) Connell drew this intriguing plan of her boyhood room in July 2009 recalling its role as a container of secrets.

by Australian gender sociologist Raewyn (formerly Robert) Connell, she underlines the importance of his own 1950s boyhood bedroom as a container of secrets:

„In teenage years I had my own room, it was pretty well gender-neutral as I remember it – bed with cover provided by my mum and curtains sewn by her, desk for homework, shelf for books, no decorations and I didn't stick things up on the walls, this was before blue-tak was invented and my parents would not have allowed drawing pins. In the wall was a cupboard for my clothes, and behind this was the space under the roof, and I had an opening there and in among the rafters I hid a few objects that somehow symbolized my other body and gave me a continuing point of reference. So the key thing for

me pre-adulthood was a secret space rather than a decorated space.<sup>16</sup> Note also that Connell recalls escaping out the dormer window, shown here in the plan, „so I could go walking in the open air wearing a skirt, which was a great relief!“ As I learned from studying children in the Eichler house, sometimes we learn more about social codes by looking at how they are resisted, than how they are prescribed.

**Conclusion** Social convention and practice associate material artefacts with our biological sex as soon as we are born. In postwar North America, children's bedrooms have been a strong and consistent place where such material associations are made, partly because of the increasing emphasis on planning a child's private domain in the suburban house. One of the markers is the pink/blue code, which parents, children, and retailers all concur expresses gender.

What might we take away from this quick exploration of late 20<sup>th</sup>-century children's bedrooms? With a bit of faith, four points: (1) ideal and real décor are remarkably close, (2) it is important to examine children's places for understanding children, not just assume they track adult trends, (3) the traditional methods of architectural history are inadequate for such research, and (4) understanding the bedrooms of children whose „gender identity“ is not conventionally fixed may help us to see more clearly the (subtle) role of material culture in gender identity formation.

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**1** Experts today do not agree on whether over-exposure to pink is damaging to girls. See Claire Bates, Should we not dress girls in pink? BBC News Magazine, 8 January 2009. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/magazine/7817496.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/7817496.stm) (accessed 7 July 2009).

**2** See Irene Guenther, *Nazi Chic? Fashioning Women in the Third Reich*, Oxford, New York 2004.

**3** It is unclear exactly when this hospital practice began. I have consulted with history-of-childbirth experts in Canada and the United States and nobody seems to know. It is complicated by the exclusive use of black and white photos in the postwar period.

**4** The best surveys of American bedrooms are Elizabeth Collins Cromley's: *A History of American Beds and Bedrooms*, in: *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture IV*, ed. by Thomas Carter, Bernard L. Herman, *Vernacular Architecture Forum*, Columbia 1991, pp. 177–186, and: *Sleeping Around: A History of American Beds and Bedrooms*, in: *Journal of Design History*, Oxford, UK, vol. 3(1), 1990, pp. 1–17.

**5** Note Susan Helen James, „Bedroom problems“: *architecture, gender, and sexuality, 1945–63*. M.

Arch. thesis, McGill University, School of Architecture 1996.

**6** Curtis Besinger, *A Recognition of the Need for Independence*, in: *House Beautiful*, April 1960, p. 44.

**7** See Annmarie Adams, *The Eichler Home: Intention and Experience in Postwar Suburbia*, in: *Gender, Class, and Shelter: Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture V*, ed. by Elizabeth Collins Cromley and Carter L. Hudgins, Knoxville 1995, p. 168. Contemporary magazines described the kitchen as a command post: „In a straightforward, thoroughly American way, however, the kitchen is the center of the whole house. Its windows face in three directions. When its interior wall is pushed back out of sight, the woman of the house can keep tabs on almost any activity. She looks out on the deck where the children ride their tricycles; she can tune in on guest conversations while she's serving dinner: she even has a special lookout over one end of the sink counter to see who is at the door.“ Conrad Brown, *Two Houses in one: A wing for the children and a wing for you*, in: *House Beautiful*, August 1962, p. 58.

**8** Average house sizes jumped from 1,500 square feet in 1970 to 2,300 in 2001. Fred A. Bernstein, *Are McMansions going out of style?* in: *New York Times*, 2 October 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/02/realestate/02nati.html?pagewanted=2&r=1#> (accessed 17 June 2009). „Average household size in the United States has dropped steadily from 3.67 members in 1940 to 2.62 in 2002. The average size of new houses increased from about 1,100 ft<sup>2</sup> (100 m<sup>2</sup>) in the 1940s and 1950s to 2,340 ft<sup>2</sup> (217 m<sup>2</sup>) in 2002. Factoring together the family size and house size statistics, we find that in 1950 houses were built with about 290 square feet (27 m<sup>2</sup>) per family member, whereas in 2003 houses provided 893 square feet (83 m<sup>2</sup>) per family member (NAHB 2003) — a factor of 3 increase.“ See Alex Wilson and Jessica Boehland, *Small is Beautiful: U.S. House Size, Resource Use, and the Environment*, in: *Journal of Industrial Ecology*, vol. 9, nos. 1–2 (January 2005) p. 277.

**9** Generation X in Wikipedia: „Individuals considered to be within Generation X were born, and grew up during the later years of, and in the decade following the Cold War. They are most often linked to the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush. Coming of age after the Vietnam War had

ended, now in their 30's and 40's their political experiences were shaped by the end of the cold war and the fall of the Berlin wall. This generation saw the inception of the home computer, the rise of videogames, and the Internet as a tool for social and commercial purposes. Dot.com businesses, MTV, Desert Storm, Grunge music, Hip hop culture and AIDS are associated with this generation.“

**10** *Starting Young*, in: *House Beautiful*, September 1998, p. 126.

**11** Joseph Giovannini, *Electronic Equipment is Climbing the Walls*, in: *Chicago Tribune* 26 July 1987, p. 16; Dinah Hall, *Take that, Postman Pat: Children's Rooms don't have to be a case of My Little Pony meets Jurassic Park*, in: *The Independent*, 19 Dec 1993 <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/interiors-take-that-postman-pat-childrens-rooms-dont-have-to-be-a-case-of-my-little-pony-meets-jurassic-park-they-can-have-style-writes-dinah-hall-1468398.html> (accessed 17 June 2009).

**12** *Study: Children's bedrooms new media center of homes*, in: *San Jose Business Journal* 6 October 2003, <http://sanjose.bizjournals.com/sanjose/stories/2003/10/06/daily11.html> (accessed 17 June 2009).

**13** *Riches lurk in kids' bedrooms*, in: *Herald Sun*, 1 March 2007, [http://www.news.com.au/business/story/0,23636,21303050-14302,00.html?from=public\\_rss](http://www.news.com.au/business/story/0,23636,21303050-14302,00.html?from=public_rss) (accessed 17 June 2009).

**14** Personal correspondence from Kim, 6 July 2008.

**15** The role of the closet as a treasury of secrets is well known; architectural curator Henry Urbach has underlined its importance, as well as the primping space in front of the closet, in the spatial history of gay men. Urbach insists „the ante-closet can be further elaborated with reference to Gilles Deleuze's notion of the pli or fold. The pli is a space that emerges, both within and against social relations, to constitute a space of self-representation at once connected to and free from social norms.“ Henry Urbach, *Closets, Clothes, Disclosure*, in: *Assemblage*, no. 30, August 1996, pp. 62–73.

**16** Personal correspondence from Raewyn Connell, 14 May 2009.