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# BLOOMSBURY AND SPACE BOUNDARIES

Theoretical  
article

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## Abstract

*The purpose of this paper is to explore the complex ways in which Bloomsbury artists approached space, challenging and blurring the boundaries between the domestic/private domain and the public sphere, and also between life and art. Looking deep into the private space, these artists posited the self, which was of utmost importance to them, at the intersection between two previously distinct spheres. With their metaphorically charged symbolism of rooms, windows, houses, gardens, on the one hand, and streets, parks, and squares, on the other, Virginia Woolf's novels, diary and essays, E. M. Forster's novels and essays, the paintings of Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, and the Omega Workshops organized by the Bloomsbury artists suggest an ambivalent contrast and fusion between the most intimate aspects of the self and the public space.*

In her essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” Virginia Woolf famously stated that the human character changed around the year 1910. What she meant by this is that a whole set of values, norms, customs, attitudes, even life style and fashion took a dramatic turn at the end of the first decade of the twentieth century. However, Woolf was aware that the change had to be gradual, and in order to illustrate it she sketched the parallel profile of the cook, who, in the case of the Victorian servant, was a “formidable, silent, obscure, inscrutable” creature, in contrast to his Georgian (i.e. modern early twentieth century) foil, “a creature of sunshine and fresh air.” (Woolf, 1967). This analogy may work as the starting point of the idea that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, what used to be clear-cut boundaries between the private domestic space, on the one hand, and the public sphere, on the other, were challenged by new social patterns, which resulted in altered perceptions of these domains and their former demarcations.

The Bloomsbury Group was a result of this momentous shift. This new wave of artists had inherited the fossilized Victorian culture and had lived in stiff Victorian homes, but they felt what a heavy burden it was on their backs. It was not only the cook who was undergoing transformations, but the houses together with the furniture in them, the streets, the cities, and the mind sets of their dwellers. Under the pressure of a burgeoning consumer culture, the boundary between the private and the public sphere tended to blur, liquefy, and then disappear altogether, and this perception lies at the core of how the Bloomsburies reflected space.

Like the whole supposedly “objective” realm, rooms and houses lost their material feel and functions and became metaphors of a less and less solid reality instead. In real life, Bloomsbury rooms and houses were spaces imbued with the spirit of their inhabitants and visitors. Since they were not merely material sites, those homes opened themselves up to the larger world outside, absorbing its essence. There were gossip and trivia, of course, but what those interiors truly expressed was a wealth of intellectual and spiritual energy, an exquisite refinement and an innovative zest.

Thus, it is not only the boundaries between the private and the public space that were challenged and blurred, but those between life and art at the same time. Jane Goldman argues that “Woolf’s cook constitutes a modern allegory of the emergence of modern women into the public sphere and her essay explores the aesthetic and political ramifications of that event” (Goldman in Humm, 2010). Looking back at the traditions underpinning the Bloomsbury artists’ approach to “reality”, an earlier stage of this turning point meets the eye, and that is the Aesthetic movement of the 1890s, relying on the principle of art for art’s

sake. What artists like Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsly, or art historians like Walter Pater highlighted was a need of the human mind and soul to be surrounded by beauty. Two decades or so before the Bloomsbury Group lived up to the same principle, the late nineteenth century artists had already started to blur the deep seated boundaries between life and art together with those between the private and the public sphere. After all, what does the metaphor of Wilde’s picture of Dorian Gray suggest if not a dangerous transgression of those demarcations, as well as their futility? The author’s declaration in the Preface that the artist’s aim is “to reveal art and conceal the artist” (Wilde, 1985) sheds light on the ironical twist that in real life the novel revealed the artist and concealed his aim. It was equally ironic that the peril Dorian set for himself in fiction by turning his own person into a work of art and letting art hideously reflect his tarnished self anticipated the risk Wilde ran by writing this transgressive kind of book under the influence of a French novel, which effaced boundaries to such an extent as to explode them and create an enclosed space of aesthetic refinement. That artificially exquisite space in Huysmans’ *À rebours* is emblematic for the strong tendency in the culture of the *fin de siècle* to make beauty appear as the most valuable principle of life. Thus, life itself became secondary, while beauty always came first. Another postulate in Wilde’s Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* claims that “All art is at once surface and symbol” and in connection to it, “Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril” and “Those who read the symbol do so at their peril” (Wilde, 1985). What Wilde means is made clear by all the other postulates in the Preface, which contend that art is above everything else, i.e. above good or evil, agreement or disagreement. Also, art serves no concrete or immediate purpose. It springs out of a state which, as Wilde suggests, is contemplation and if it is aimed at anything, that is contemplation on the viewer’s/listener’s/ reader’s part. It is in this sense that “All art is quite useless” (Wilde, 1985).

To a large extent, Bloomsbury rooms and houses in the artists’ real life and in their art were man-made environments onto which their designers projected their most sophisticated tastes. True to the principles of art for art’s sake inherited from the late nineteenth century Aestheticism, the Bloomsbury artists inhabited the world by giving it shape and having it contained in those enclosed spaces. Looking into the meaning of “room” in Virginia Woolf’s novel *Jacob’s Room*, David Dowling shows that it is not merely a metaphor of Jacob’s mind; nor is it the character’s context, i.e. “the England for which he died” (Dowling, 1985). The critic suggests that the room is a larger “whole”, i.e. something Woolf had always tried to convey in her shorter or longer pieces, namely the

character's vision, which encompassed everything. In this light, *Mrs. Dalloway*, which is another of Woolf's prismatic interplay of inner and outer space, also gravitates around vision. Set in the London of 1923, the novel weaves the characters' destinies in a fine loom which connects parks, streets, trees, flowers, rural England, urban England, men and women of all generations, life and death, sanity and insanity, until the climax which is a party at Clarissa's place in Westminster. The final line is a typical expression of vision: "For there she was." (Woolf, 1996) That one line tells everything about Clarissa's triumph, which is essentially the victory of one's vision. Woolf and the other Bloomsbury artists were aware that such victories could be scored and keep their validity only in the realm of art. Beyond it, there was the danger zone of chaos, confusion and destruction.

In 1910 of all years, E. M. Forster, one of the fringe members of Bloomsbury published *Howards End*. In *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, George Dangerfield scrutinizes the tremendous significance of the year 1910. In the Foreword, Dangerfield argues that 1910 "is actually a landmark in English history" (Dangerfield, 2011). The reason the historian gives for its crucial importance is that "it was in 1910 that fires long smoldering in the English spirit suddenly flared up, so that by the end of 1913 Liberal England was reduced to ashes" (Dangerfield, 2011). In *On or About December 1910: Early Bloomsbury and Its Intimate World*, Peter Stansky reinforces the argument, stating that "Perhaps the symbolic, culminating event of those prewar years was the funeral in 1910 of the rich and vulgar king Edward VII, attended by a panoply of monarchs" (Stansky, 1997). According to Stansky, and also judging by the enthusiastic remarks Virginia Woolf made in her memoir, the Post-Impressionist exhibition assembled in London in November and December 1910 was a bomb. Stansky has no doubts that it was under its strong impact that Woolf wrote the famous words about the change in human character. For people so arty, significant events in art with such profound effects upon aesthetic shifts are more important than political episodes.

E. M. Forster was a self-declared liberal, a writer and a Bloomsbury. Around the year 1910, he could not miss the opportunity of capturing the spirit of an England that was surely dying, questioning the future of an England that needed to survive at all costs. This is why *Howards End* harps on tenuous connections and why a house becomes the metaphor for the whole country, and most significantly for all the values that were essential in England in 1910, a year of dramatic shifts. It is obvious that *Howards End*, the house and the domain preserve the old English spirit unaltered. It is because she wants to pass on this valuable legacy

of Englishness that Ruth Wilcox chooses Margaret as a rightful heir. Margaret is fully aware of the importance of connections, and despite all difficulties, she eventually manages to get everybody together at *Howards End* of all places. The novel ends on a note of hope, which, as Forster knew too well, could be achieved only in art. Thus, it is only when one reads *Howards End* that the year 1910 is given shape, which is a house, and a bright end, which is the image in the last line: "The field's cut!" Helen cried excitedly - the big meadow! We've seen to the very end, and it'll be such a crop of hay as never!" (Forster, 1973) The feeling this ending gives is that of an opening up not only in terms of fictional irresolution but also with regards to a prospect of continuity which the novel questions, explores and now promises in its open closure. Within the book's covers, it may be reiterated whenever the book is read, and that turns the house, which stands for England and its spirit, into a space of connection and future prospects of wellbeing. What Forster actually achieved in this novel, which was considered the best of the year along with Bennett's *Clayhanger*, was a well-balanced interplay of personal life, family life and the life of the larger community, and also between text and context. The spheres and spaces in the novel run into each other in a Bloomsbury spirit of connection.

Indeed, connection and friendship were paramount values all the Bloomsbury members embraced. The Bloomsbury artists, who shared one another's iconoclasm and aesthetic view of life, were held together by sometimes intricate family ties. The sophisticated nature of those relations was the result of their unconventional spirit. The moment when they set sail to experiment with a new life style is captured by Virginia Woolf in an anecdote. That the setting is the drawing room speaks for itself. Woolf recorded that, while they were there

The door opened and the long and sinister figure of Mr Lytton Strachey stood on the threshold. He pointed his finger at a stain on Vanessa's white dress.

"Semen?" he said.

Can one really say it? I thought and we burst out laughing (Woolf in Stansky, 1997).

The year was 1908. Although the Stephen sisters, Virginia and Vanessa were not political activists, Virginia was a feminist. In 1910, she began the new year by volunteering to work for the women's suffrage cause. In her work, like in Forster's, femininity is seen in close connection with rooms and houses. In fact, houses are metaphorical projections of the women's bodies. It is not merely that women dwell in the privacy of those enclosed spaces, but more significantly women use the private space as one in which

everybody and everything connects and harmonizes. S. P. Rosenbaum noticed that

There are traces of *Howards End* to be found in the structure and subject of *To the Lighthouse*, with its connected antitheses, its family life in the country, the continuing presence of a dead woman, and a housecleaner called Mrs Bast (Rosenbaum, 1995).

Deliberate or not, those “traces” indicate the two Bloomsbury friends’ affinities based on a similar approach to life and art. Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* focuses on the figure of an artist, Lily Briscoe, who is able to have her vision, which is an expression of her androgynous mind, only after reconciling the feminine and the masculine principles embodied in the novel by Mr and Mrs Ramsay. Similarly, there is an androgynous tree in *Howards End*, which Ruth associates with superstition and Margaret with connection. In each of the novels there is a house, which stands for England itself. In *Howards End*, the house survives, though it is under the permanent threat of the Wilcoxes’ Philistinism. In *To the Lighthouse*, the house undergoes the ravages of time passing and the war. In each of the novels there is a woman who dies and who passes her legacy to a younger woman, whose job is to reconcile or connect disparate elements. In *Howards End* Ruth’s spirit gives substance to Margaret’s project, while in *To the Lighthouse* Lily takes over where Mrs Ramsay left until she has her vision captured in painting. In both novels there are rooms, windows, doors and gardens, which are not so much demarcations as connections between inner and outer spheres.

The Bloomsbury artists owned and assembled in several houses. One of them, owned by the Woolfs, was Monk’s House in the Sussex countryside. Victoria Rosner argues that, despite being neglected by critics in their discussions of Bloomsbury’s domestic spaces, Monk’s House has the potential of shedding significant light upon Virginia Woolf’s life and work. Although it seems to suggest “withdrawal, contemplation and stasis”, Virginia associated it “with action, involvement and change, a place where she worked on all her major books and where Leonard held meetings of the Labour Party in the sitting room” (Rosner in Humm, 2010). The house served as a space where ideas were tested, where the intimacy of thinking and domesticity fused with that of a larger communal sphere. Like their residence in London, where they ran the Hogarth Press from their basement, Monk’s House was another place with which the Woolfs experimented to overthrow “the division between public and private spheres” (Rosner in Humm, 2010). This is the house where Virginia conceived the idea of *A Room of One’s Own*; surely her work in its rooms, in which she explored the chambers and corridors of her own

mind, provided her with the metaphor of the room as a gendered space, which may be private and public at the same time.

Virginia Woolf experimented with the topography of Monk’s House, testing the influence of place upon the creative process by shifting her writing spot many times during her years there. In 1921, she had a writing shed converted from a tool shed for her to do her writing. The hybridity of that space, which was neither completely outdoors nor completely indoors, fitted perfectly her idea of the androgynous mind, at the same time giving her a sense of the ideal room of one’s own. Rosner finds a close connection between the shed and the writer’s creative activity. The place itself was there not simply to serve a purpose, but also to imprint and keep a rhythm. The writing lodge “was visibly a place for one person and for one purpose. Woolf wrote there every morning that she was in Rodmell; in the afternoons she went out and walked on the Sussex Downs that were visible out of the room’s window” (Rosner in Humm, 2010). Because she was weary of interruptions, the hybrid space of the shed was meant to isolate her from the disruptions with which every woman has to deal when she is within the domestic sphere. In *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf traced this pattern when she wrote about the way in which Jane Austen had to keep her work out of prying eyes whenever somebody entered the room. Of course this idea resonates with the women’s need of privacy, whose metaphor is the room of one’s own: the narrator in “The Mark on the Wall” needs it, Clarissa Dalloway revels in her ascetic room, Lily Briscoe – the woman artist feels that she has to isolate herself from men’s reprimanding words that “women can’t write, women can’t paint” in a secure haven. Like her characters, the author strongly resented the idea of spatial fixity, which is why she continued to experiment with space both in real life and in fiction. To illustrate this, Rosner remarks that the shed at Monk’s House was knocked down and replaced by another one in a different location in the garden, new rooms were built at frequent intervals, and sometimes the writer would compose in the bathtub. It is interesting to note that this refusal of fixity and the desire to shift perspective on the part of a modernist woman writer can be seen in sharp contrast to the Victorian male intellectual’s habit, for instance her father’s, of being rooted in a single spot while he did his writing. Rosner’s concluding line summarizes the role and significance of Monk’s House (Figure 1), emphasizing Woolf’s experiments with space, the connection between private and public spheres, and also between life and art:

Monk’s House was always a work in progress, an architectural palimpsest through which we can read the history of

the forging of rooms of one's own.  
(Rosner in Humm, 2010)

If Monk's House is associated with the Woolfs and especially with Virginia, Charleston, also in Sussex, is the architectural "portrait" of her sister Vanessa. As Monk's House was fashioned by Virginia, Charleston was decorated by Vanessa and Duncan Grant, reflecting the rhythm of their life together. Nuala Hancock argues that in her painting, Vanessa "develops patterns of commas, circles and verticals which enliven the interior, creating a sense of contextual animation and felt motivity. In the garden room, she and Grant stencilled large-scale paisley motifs on to the walls, sponging and dabbing paint through perforated card, physically imprinting her marks through bodily impression" (Hancock, 2012). Writing about it, Hancock relates Vanessa's painting method with choreography and shows that her art "is physically animated, corporeally energized, expansively expressive, releasing ideas through movement and gesture" (Hancock, 2012). Looking closer into those associations, the commas patterned by Vanessa get her painting close to her sister's writing, while Virginia always envied her sister on her art, trying to do in writing what Vanessa did in painting (Figure 2).

According to Nuala Hancock, the two sisters repeated the topography of their houses in London with Monk's House and Charleston in Sussex. Thus, the proximity of their dwelling places in the city was replicated by the undulating Downs, which separated and connected at the same time their homes in the countryside. Virginia's choreography when she shifted her writing places and when she rehearsed her sentences aloud while walking on the Downs was mirrored by Vanessa's, as in her paintings of chairs, tables, mantelpieces, cupboards and jugs she suggested "the cyclical rhythms, the repeated body ballets enacted at Charleston: coffee after lunch, reading in the studio, the preparation of food in the kitchen, chess in the garden room at night, and paintings of painters in the act of painting – the essential daily rhythm for Bell, without which she felt 'off balance'" (Hancock, 2012).

The Bloomsbury artists cared so much for the last word in art and for turning their own houses into places of refinement and taste that they embarked on a project initiated by Roger Fry in 1913. Fry called it the Omega Workshops, and its name suggested the last word in art. All work was to be anonymous since it was art that mattered above everything. Iconoclastic, unconventional, drawing on Post-Impressionist and Cubist art, the Bloomsbury artefacts created in the Omega Workshops were objects for the home like rugs, linens, ceramics, furniture and clothing (Figure 3). Their bold colours and abstract design were meant to oppose mainstream Edwardian culture and art.

The Omega Workshops served as an interface in the visual arts between the private and the public sphere. The objects were for the home, but the Workshop's premises were open to the public to visit, order and buy the products. The project's aim was to produce and sell an innovative kind of art that challenged the boundaries between high and low art. As Fry told a journalist in 1913:

It is time that the spirit of fun was introduced into furniture and into fabrics. We have suffered too long from the dull and the stupidly serious.

(<http://www.courtauld.ac.uk/gallery/exhibitions/2009/omega/Bloomsbury2.shtml>)

Sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska made Matisse-inspired painted plates, and other artefacts included Cubist-inspired lamp stands, a Ballets Russes-inspired waistcoat made from an Omega woven fabric called *Cracow*. In other words, what the Bloomsbury visual artists did was to make the colours of all arts run into one another, breaking the boundaries between them. Although the Omega Workshops were discontinued in 1919, those six years of their existence made a difference in the British spatial arts: the mark of that difference was experimentalism and innovation. That innovative spirit arced to encompass all the arts and influences from many cultures, some of them very remote.

Since Henry James in the late nineteenth century and continuing with the Bloomsbury artists, the art of fiction had been seen in close connection with architecture and also with the other arts. Forster considered that pattern and rhythm were important aspects of the novel. In her metaphoric and visually charged language, Virginia Woolf kept speaking about tunnels, corridors, or statues against the sky, but she undermined the solidity of those constructions by using stream of consciousness and the rhythm of the waves. The houses and rooms, for which Roger Fry and other visual artists conceived their artefacts in the Omega Workshops, were intersections between the most intimate and essential aspects of the private sphere and the public domain. Woolf's diary and letters, and also her sister Vanessa's epistles are replete with depictions of the most minute details of their homes, their insides and gardens, which sprang from the sisters' desire to chart their dwelling spaces, and by charting or writing them down, to capture their spirit and thus open them out to the larger world.

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**Figure 1. Monks House, home of Virginia Woolf. It shows Virginia with art critic Clive Bell, husband of Vanessa Bell, Virginia's sister, and Vanessa's daughter Angelica from her relationship with artist Duncan Grant.**



**Figure 2. Charleston, the home and country meeting place of the Bloomsbury Group**



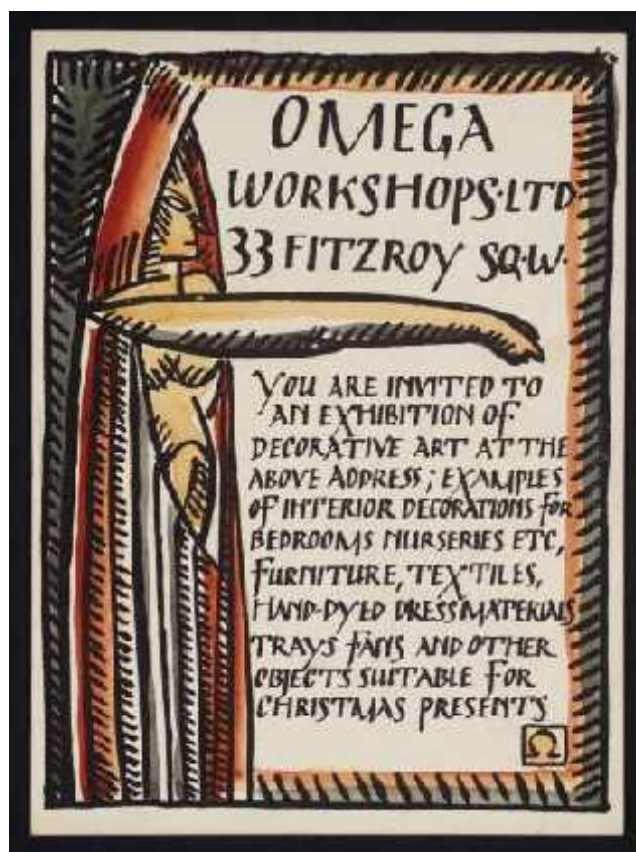


Figure 3. Omega Workshops Poster