

Transing Space(s)

Vio:la Wagner, Alvie Augustin

Abstract: In *cisnormative* societies, space is defined through a binary categorization of gender rooted in essentialist ideals. These frameworks inscribe gender stereotypes and social norms into space – archiving, reproducing, and consolidating structures that contribute to a non-binary erasure. Identities and bodies beyond essentialist classifications are marginalized and often rendered invisible in spatial definitions and practices. This dynamic becomes visible through binary patterns of thought, power relations, *cisnormative* perspectives, and the influence of *cisnormative* feminisms on space. In order to uncover and deconstruct *cissexist* structures, we ask ourselves how they are inscribed in space and our understanding of space. Starting the research from a *trans*-activist perspective, the following text gives directions on our way to *trans* understandings and practices of space. A literature review was conducted within fields of architecture theory, *trans* studies, disability studies, as well as urban studies, and complemented by qualitative interviews with *trans* activists, overall aiming to foster an interdisciplinary and intersectional lens.

Keywords: Non-binary; *Transing*; Embodied Space; Spatial Practices; Digital Space.

This work wouldn't be possible without community.

Introduction

This transdisciplinary approach to spatial practices explores links between space and gender beyond (*cis*¹)normativity, exposing harmful normativities in spatial practices. Throughout the whole work, we follow the aim of »transing« our spatial practice, inspired by Tim Gough's (2017) notion of »transing« as a way to challenge binary structures and categories in architecture. We seek to apply this lens to our research by identifying the normativities that stand in the way of such an approach and deriving possible methodological pathways from it.

A systematic literature review centering *trans* scholars is complemented by qualitative interviews with *trans* activists, as well as supplemented with non-academic sources, creating a blend of knowledge forms. We interviewed two activists, who are situated within the wide area of *trans* research. We (the authors) are *white*, *trans*, have an academic background, and were born in the Austrian countryside, and now live and study in Vienna. With this paper, we contribute to an Euro-centered academic form of knowledge production. However, we find it important to remember that what appears to be *trans* studies and disability studies have their origins in activism, struggles of everyday life, and in the respective minorities. We are writing this text not with the aim of providing an integration of *trans* studies and spatial or architectural theory, but rather to collect possible paths of thought inspired by *trans* activist and *trans* scholar practice that can be pursued in further research and discussion.

Exposing Normativities / The Binary Machine

According to architect, artist and theorist Tim Gough, what architecture »is« or is assumed to be is determined through a performative way. In other words, architecture is not just about objects or spaces, but about how we understand and experience them. Architecture is made to fit into a »binary machine,« a term Gough borrows from theorist Gilles Deleuze (2006), meaning that it

¹ cis: someone whose gender is aligned with the gender assigned by others at birth

gets divided into rigid categories. Gough introduces »transing« to challenge or queer a binary system (Gough 2017: 4). In Gough's words: »The transing task, then, is to queer this binary machine, to make architecture not something sieved through the categories, but mixed across them« (ibid.: 7). Importantly, Gough notes that transing (like queering) does not just add a trans perspective to something non-*trans*, but instead highlights the ways materiality is already *trans*. In doing so, the normative processes that make gendered transing seem exceptional or diagnosable become revealed (ibid.).

For us, transing space offers an urgent and necessary approach to spatial practices, thinking, and collaborations: It helps us uncover the binaries and fixed categories that shape how we design, plan, use, and think gender and space and their relations with bodies. This urgency stems from the continued dominance of binary gender norms in architectural and spatial practices, which marginalize non-fitting bodies and experiences. A *transing* of space means a *transing* of our everyday practice, which seeks to uncover and disrupt normativities in order to resist growing anti-trans sentiments worldwide.

Wrong Embodiment

A common *transnormative* narrative is to be stuck in the wrong body. It assumes that the trans subject is in the wrong skin, or – as depicted in *Silence of the Lambs* (Harris 1991) – wants to have a different skin. This narrative of being in the wrong body is often framed through the experiences of *trans* individuals like Christine Jorgenson, the first American to undergo gender confirmation surgery, whose public transition in the 1950s made her a well-known figure and symbol of medical transition (Prosser 1998). The narrative is also reinforced by public discourse, which has historically been shaped by medical perspectives. Early on, sexologists were at the forefront of engaging with *trans* issues, laying the groundwork for the medicalization of gender identity. The umbrella term »trans« is historically grown out of sexology and has its roots in 1910, when the sexologist Hirschfeld introduced the term »Transvestitismus« (Dobler 2004). The image of the *wrong* body can also refer to a body that does not conform to societal norms and is therefore considered not right. This idea resonates with how other movements, such as Disability Studies, discuss the ways in which bodies are pathologized and marginalized when they do not conform to dominant norms (Junge and Schmincke 2007). We want to build on these insights and explore how these social mechanisms affect the body through feelings, rather than just through physical alteration,

and subsequently how the body influences space and vice versa. As Prosser explains, »To be oneself is first of all to have a skin of one's own and, secondly, to use it as a space in which one can experience sensations« (Prosser 1998: 73).

»I personally had and also mostly have right now a difficult relation with bodies and especially with my own. Not because there was a development needed or brought forward through the term *trans*. But rather how the terms the majority of our societies nowadays describe the terms of what is normal and what is a particularity. My own experience of my body was never fitting with those understandings, but also not with the term *trans* for the most time of my life because it was understood outside the community mostly as being on the transit from one fixed gender towards the other and that was never how I felt myself.« – Interview² with *trans* activist

Spatial Maladjustment

Who has access to spaces? And whose bodies are excluded or delegitimized by these spaces?

The conceptual history of the term *trans* is being continued by theorist, historian and activist Susan Stryker, among others. Stryker does not define being *trans* as something that has a destination (for example, *a sex change*, or *the other sex*), but as a movement away from an unchosen starting point (Stryker 2008). This movement carries a strong spatial dimension, which is also reflected in spatial metaphors such as »coming out of the closet« or »being at home in the own body« (Crawford 2020). However, spaces as well as movement are not neutral, rather shaped by power relations determining who can move freely and who cannot (Ahmed 2006). Within this, the understanding of movement is narrowed to normative understandings, while it can be discussed in various forms, e.g. over orientations, which may not be only physical, but also social or cultural (ibid. 2006). There can be racial and ableist effects to the universalization of *trans* as movement, as this »movement away from something« is primarily narrated through *white*, Eurocentric *trans* experience. It tends to associate movement with corporal freedom and space, often leaving racialized and disabled bodies portrayed

² The interviews were conducted by Alvie Augustin and Vio:la Wagner in September 2024 with *trans* activists.

as fixed, immobile, or excluded (Awkward-Rich 2022). Or as poet and theorist Awkward-Rich (2022: 8) writes:

»Despite the literal and metaphorical association of transition and transness itself with travel, mobility, and movement, trans life under racial capitalism is at least as much about stuckness, waiting, ›lag time‹, and recurrence – about living in definitely.«

Awkward-Rich interprets this movement as a departure from forms of maladjustment. For this, Awkward-Rich borrows Garland-Thomson's (2011) understanding, which is widely discussed in disability studies, whereas maladjustment occurs when »an environment does not sustain the shape and function of the body; that enters it« and has the consequences of rendering misfitting bodies as social misfits (Awkward-Rich 2022: 7). The use of maladjustment, again, carries a strong spatial dimension; however, one that holds space accountable (in its physical and social and societal form) rather than the movement of the *trans* subject. Here, space does not remain metaphorical but can be interpreted as the very environment that produces the misfitting body.

How and where do spatial environments fail to sustain *trans* bodies? Or do they sustain some of them and fail others? What does this mean for spatial practices? It must be affectively and structurally accessible and designed in such a way that it does not mark different bodies and identities as maladjusted. Spaces are not neutral; the creation of separate spaces, »integration,« only shifts exclusion to other places, but does not eliminate it. Inclusion does not mean including bodies, but changing the environment that excludes these bodies. This also means that space must be able to contain non-normative temporal and spatial realities. Instead of asking what a space has to look like to be *trans*-inclusive, we should first question where norms are embodied in spaces and how we can break down these norms.

A concrete example of the problems that arise when marginalized groups are merely integrated but not considered inclusively is the OG5 project, which was a temporary accommodation for queer homeless people in Vienna. The project intended to create a safe space for homeless *trans* and queer people who experience discrimination and violence in regular facilities that rely on a binary gender system. However, as in the beginning, *trans* people were hesitant to use the new facilities, while at the same time, there was an overall acute shortage of homeless shelters in Vienna. Due to their free beds, the OG5 opened their doors also to cis men. As a result, *trans* people and *trans*

women in particular no longer felt safe and experienced violence by their roommates. The care staff were not sufficiently trained to react appropriately to these situations. In the end, one *trans* woman was even expelled from the center (Habringger et al. 2023). This example underscores the urgent need for a shift from merely integrating marginalized groups into existing spaces, to rethinking and transforming the very structures and norms that govern these spaces.

Passing

In 1994, Susan Stryker wrote the text »My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage.« In it, Stryker compares the »*trans*(sexual)« body with its modifications and uses the monster metaphor for the experiences of trans bodies, in particular for the feeling of being rejected by society and regarded as »unnatural« or in the wrong body. In order not to confront people with visible *transness*, *trans* people sometimes speak of adopting a strategy of »passing.« To *pass* is to be perceived as normative (for example, *cis*-passing: to be perceived as *cis*). »Passing means to live successfully in the gender of choice, to be accepted as a natural member of that gender« (Stone 1991: 12).

However, passing also means erasing a part of one's own experience, leaving it behind, with forgetfulness as integral to becoming. Passing has long been a tool to be invisible and safe(r), not to be perceived as alien, but it also adheres to binary images. Passing is thus only a coping strategy in a binary *cissexist* social order, but not a way out of binarity. »The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House« (Lorde, 1984: 110). If a body exists within the social order, then it must subordinate itself to it. If it does not or cannot subordinate itself, then it is a foreign body within this order and has the potential to disrupt this order. Non-passing bodies not only claim space, they expose and destabilize the very systems that seek to render them invisible. Yet not everyone can afford non-passing, as the privileges tied to passing are often shaped by whiteness, able-bodiedness, and other intersecting forms of social advantage. According to scholar and theorist Judith Butler, subjectivation refers to the process by which individuals are shaped as subjects through social norms and power structures, simultaneously constrained by and enabled through these norms (Butler 1990). If the built environment has been shaped by norms of gender, race and sex over and over again throughout past centuries, *cisnormativity* becomes deeply embedded in space.

Whose spaces?

In the 1980s, gender planning emerged as an independent planning discipline to answer this question. Historically, gender planning has primarily focused on addressing the distinct roles, needs, and inequalities experienced by »women« and »men,« rooted in binary gender perspectives (Moser 2014). It ignores the body itself as a fully legitimate source of knowledge (embodied knowledge) and manifests socially constructed binary gender roles by defending them rather than breaking out of them. Something similar happens with the conception of so-called »FLINTA*-spaces« (German acronym for woman, lesbian, inter*, trans*, agender). In an aim to create a truly inclusive space for people with diverse gender identities, reference is made to existing categories. In this way, these spaces often fail to maintain the bodies for which the space is intended, as normative understandings of how those categories should look like, as well as social hierarchies between the categories, remain. Bodies that have already adapted to the expectations of another system (e.g., are *cis*-passing *trans* men) or didn't have the possibility to adapt (e.g., non-*cis*-passing *trans* femmes), become invisible or have no space at all. In order to do *trans*-inclusive gender planning, gender planning would have to break out of the existing categories and stop forcing *trans* bodies into the need to pass within these categories.

An example from my (Vio:la) own activism: the conception of a body-positive space for Sapphic individuals is concerned with who is actually allowed into this space. There was also a desire not to allow men into this space. We avoided the term FLINTA* here by introducing the term *sapphic*, with the intention of being *trans*-inclusive. However, this led to friction and a feeling of insecurity, especially among *trans* masc³ people, making them hesitant to enter the space. In an attempt to give those people the opportunity to decide for themselves if they want to enter this space, one person said, »There is simply no more space for me. Neither in gay spaces, nor in lesbian/sapphic spaces. I am *trans*, and yet invisible within the community that I need.« As long as spaces that want to be *trans*-inclusive are using existing labels, it will be difficult to create a truly *trans*-inclusive place.

Affective Archives

The Institute for Sexology in Berlin was ransacked on May 6, 1933, by fascist students from the Hochschule für Leibesübungen and members of the Sturmabteilung (SA). On May 10, 1933, large parts of the institute's archive were burned at Opernplatz, now Bebelplatz. It is a historic event most people have heard of, but hardly anyone learns that it is a part of *trans* history. The collective memory was destroyed and disappeared with the burned books. Stories such as that of Dora Richter (the first known *trans* person to undergo gender reassignment surgery) was forgotten for a long time (Staatsbibliothek Berlin 2023). These repressions also affect knowledge about *trans* bodies and *trans* bodies themselves. The embodied knowledge of repression became archived.

The term archive is taken up by *trans* theorist Lucas Crawford (2020) in the text »Transgender Architectonics« and discusses the *trans* body as an archive. Crawford argues that, in order to consider the *transgender* body as an archive, two modes of analysis are required: »first, self-critical remembrance and, secondly, a forward-looking bodily forgetfulness« (Crawford 2020: 5). If we see the body as an archive, power structures are inscribed in it, carrying them within space and reproducing these normativities. Or, as philosopher Jacques Derrida says in *Archive Fever*: »There is no political power without control of the archive« (Derrida 1995: 4). According to Derrida, »The archive is not a place of originary truth. It is always partial, deferred, constructed« (ibid.). The suppression of *trans* bodies is therefore also a means of maintaining power, and space that does not include *trans* bodies is therefore an eraser of embodied knowledge (ibid.). Could Crawford's view on the Body-as-an-archive give us a tool to confront harmful normativities? Could it give us forms of freedom to discard them? Or would it mean we would carry them around with us indefinitely?

In addition to the body itself as a spatialized form of knowledge, urban and global geographies are archives, shaped by colonial and patriarchal histories marked by erasure and violence. Spatial territories such as public space have long been used to control and exclude bodies marked by race, gender, disability, and class (Sears 2015). The international spread of cross-dressing laws from the 1850s to the 1970s exemplifies this: gender non-conformity in public was criminalized, turning space itself into a tool of exclusion (Eskridge 1999). A current example of this is the LGBT⁴-free zones in Poland, where the last LGBT-free zone was only dissolved in April 2025 (Notes From

Poland 2025). The mentioned laws did not ban identities per se, but their visibility in the public and therefore, archiving their absence in spaces.

A very recent example is the introduction of the so-called »bathroom bans« in the USA, which ban trans people from public bathrooms or facilities according to their gender identity (Movement Advancement Project 2025). This is not the first time that toilets have been misused as a tool for maintaining power. Decades ago, segregation laws made by mostly non-racialized people separated racialized bodies. »African American women and *white* women were prohibited from using the restroom together because of what it would represent: ›their integration starkly symbolized social equality‹ and policy could not permit that to exist« (Spence-Mitchell 2020: 16). This legislation makes it clear once again that spaces are not neutral places – in this case the bathroom becomes a tool of control and invisibilization of non-normative bodies. »*Trans* women, even *white trans* women, are unable to use the assigned restroom for women because they have historically been deemed a danger to *white* women« (ibid.).

Transing: Methodological Urgency

Transing as a methodological aim means an urgent need to reshape binary modes of gendered planning, spatial thinking, and collaboration. Or as architectural theorist Tim Gough (2017: 53) writes: »[...] to queer this binary machine, to make architecture not something sieved through the categories, but mixed across them.« Intersectionality must be at the center of this effort, foregrounding marginalized communities in their activist practice and embodied experiences.

Practicing Relationality, Demanding Collaboration

Transing does not mean adding *trans*-ness to something previously non-*trans*. Instead, it reveals that change, movement is inherent to materiality, body, and space (Gough 2017). One way to read this through a trans activist lens is to look at theorist Lucas Crawford's answer to what *transgender* space is: those spaces we visit and navigate on a daily basis. Through *trans* bodies moving and navigating in spatial environments, a transing of space itself occurs within cisnormative constraints (Crawford 2020).

»I think the easiest way to describe it is by thinking at moments in which one tries to enter a space or open a door. The reactions of others in this particular moment are everything one needs to see the power relations and with them the structures which are shaping the room. Even if nobody is actually hostile in an open or aggressive way, the mood of the room reveals itself throughout the smallest cracks of neutrality. Every moment that is not as easy going for the people that do not fit in the *cisnormativity* as for the people who do shows how deeply rooted the structures of *cisnormativity* are within the spaces.« – Interview³ with *trans* activist

By understanding space as something lived through social practice, action, affect, interaction, and being in relation with space and others (Lefebvre 1991 [1974]), we can broaden our imagination and open up for transing ways of spatial practice. A relational and affective lens onto space further requires embracing the complexity and fluidity of *trans* lives, resisting simplified spatial understandings, and fostering a practice that welcomes the messiness of multiple voices, conflicting perspectives, and the inherent tensions between collaboration and difference.

When centering everyday practices and spatial complexity, modes of collaboration beyond what we define as disciplines become essential. This means forms of collaboration with, e.g. social workers, activists, community organizers, artists, storytellers, and writers enable a deepened methodology that prioritizes the lived experiences and challenges power dynamics in social relations. By centering *trans* activist practices, research, and storytelling in all their heterogeneity and everyday defiance, we open up radical grounds for experimentation. In other words, we begin to open up collaborative spaces where we can begin to smash the architectural binary machine.

Cyber Transing – Reimagining of Digital Space

Where offline spaces fail, digital spaces often step in. Activists, scholars, and various marginalized communities repeatedly describe digital spaces as counterspaces to offline everyday life, with the potential to establish new concepts of self and subjectivity (Rottmann et al. 2023). Numerous studies show that especially *trans* youth experience aspects of their gender

³ The interviews were conducted by Alvie Augustin and Vio:la Wagner in September 2024 with *trans* activists.

identity online that they cannot and do not experience offline. This ranges from feeling safe, experiencing care, hope, a sense of belonging, and finding community. They sometimes even open up life-saving pathways for navigating everyday life in *cisnormative* spatial environments (Austin et al. 2020). Digital spaces hold the potential for creating environments where bodies are neither immediately visible nor subjected to the normative gaze of *cisnormative* expectations. Or as trans novelist Imogen Binnie writes in *Nevada* (2013: 61), her debut novel which is seen as important landmark in *trans* fiction literature (Rosenberg 2022): »In this weird way, Internet message boards, livejournal, all these things feel like they're a safe way to talk about being *trans* – to exist without this problematic body you're stuck with, when you're offline in meatspace, [...] Which rules.«

»Digital spaces often allow us to move, dwell, and be without the limitations of trans bodies being necessarily perceived and interpreted by others – they circumvent the issue of (*cis*)passing. Digital spaces also are essential to counteract the invisibility or hiddenness of queer/trans spaces as well as community events. They thereby help to build alternatives. The usage of digital spaces is also grounded in the lack of offline spaces, nevertheless, the ones that do exist can be found via online searches. As a result, digital spaces are key for connecting trans people with each other.« – Interview⁴ with *trans* activist

It is evident that digital spaces are not exempt from the violence and power hierarchies that exist in offline contexts and even create new forms of exclusion. The radical potential of digital counterspaces, however, lies neither in romanticizing them nor in escaping the material world, but in reshaping how we inhabit both, while raising the question of what role human-centered technologies can play in this. An illustrative example of this can be video gameplay and its ways of empowering *trans* people through forms of gender euphoria. Video gameplay holds the potential to offer intense spatial and embodied experiences involving identities, bodies, social interaction, and movement through diverse spatial worlds (Liang et al. 2025). Liang et al. (2025) took this as a starting point and asked themselves in their research how video gameplay that facilitates gender euphoria can be designed. Important parameters for this were the possibility to build trust, create safe spaces, and enable

⁴ The interviews were conducted by Alvie Augustin and Vio:la Wagner in September 2024 with trans activists.

self-expression within the game. The creation of such games offers a transing potential for spatial practice by providing valuable cues to reimagine physical spaces as sites of comfort, belonging, and change. At the same time, they turn virtual worlds into spatial experimental zones where normative assumptions about bodies, relations, and environments are reassembled.

Another example of this is architect and designer Xavi Aguirre's work with Stock-a-Studio, where augmented reality, 3D scans, and immersive media merge to create spatial experiences that blur the line between the physical and digital. Aguirre's use of digital and material components challenges conventional architectural perceptions and encourages us to rethink the very texture and materiality of space itself (Aguirre 2022a, 2022b). This artistic practice resonates with critical spatial theories that argue that digital tools do not merely supplement physical spaces. Rather, they transform access, participation, and inclusion. *Trans* activist practices illustrate this shift, creating what scholars from the disciplines of social work call »vireal appropriations of space.« The word »vireal« is a combination of the words »virtual« and »real,« and, therefore, happens where virtual and physical practices converge in the act of claiming space (Ketter 2014: 299; Röll 2014: 259).

Digital counter practices not only challenge the gender binary but also blur the spatial boundaries between online and offline, digital and analogue, real and unreal, space and non-space, materiality and immateriality. By interweaving online and offline practices, we open up the potential to transing spaces – transforming them into zones of survival, joy, hope, and resistance that challenge and disrupt normative social orders.

Process and Possibilities

When we are asked, »What does a *trans* inclusive spatial practice look like?« people often expect norms and suggestions like a »*trans* Neufert,« a »*trans* modulor« or »*trans* gender planning« with a 10-step plan to a »transgender-just« city. However, this paper should make it clear that *trans* spatialities and spatial practices are processes, just as the understanding of *trans* and being *trans* is a process. Spatial environments typically sustain only certain bodies, while non-normative bodies do not necessarily adhere to any singular norm. The real challenge is not how to establish a norm for non-normative bodies but how to rethink spatial practices in a way that allows the space to adapt to the body, rather than the body adapting to the space.

As mentioned, this paper is about possibilities and questions rather than answers and solutions. Here we ask you to think about queering or transing your own spatial practices:

- What does it look like for spaces to adapt to bodies, instead of expecting people to change to fit the space?
- How can we think about the emotional and sensory experiences of people when designing spaces?
- Where are spaces of joy, comfort, and belonging, and how can they inspire us to rethink physical spaces as places of community?
- How can planners integrate social practice into their work, recognizing that planning itself must be a form of community organizing, rooted in collaboration and active engagement with the people it serves?
- What else can become imaginable if spatial disciplines did not rely on normative understandings of time and everyday life, normative understandings of social interaction, or movement, as well as the physical-material as the only and primary foundation of space?

Answers and Solution

The understanding of *trans* has evolved from medicalized frameworks to more fluid, self-determined meanings by moving through time and space. Similarly, we observed how spaces are not static but created, transformed, and challenged through the interplay of (non-normative) bodies, social practices, and power structures. *Trans(ing)* our view on space reveals that meaning and identity are relational and shaped by movements, interactions, and everyday life within space. Navigating *trans* bodies through (*cis*-, hetero-, dyadic⁵)-normative environments is not merely reactive; rather, it can be transformative. Recognizing space as inherently dynamic and shaped through movement, social encounter, and time reveals its political dimension.

A transing of spatial disciplines means paying attention to the complexities of everyday life and bodily experience through an intersectional lens. It calls for an active inclusion of non-academic forms of knowledge production, especially those rooted in activism and lived experience. Future research must seriously engage with how such methodologies can take shape. The aim requires not only recognition but a power-shifting commitment to integrate everyday ways of knowing into spatial thinking and practice. Anything less risks reproducing the very exclusions we seek to challenge.

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