

Hi! Welcome to Arse!

I'm going to be talking today about sex, architecture, and urbanism. This talk is going to be a bit more off the cuff than I usually go for, because a nasty cold ate all of my writing time. So, you're getting the sketchy version of this talk.

After I gave my talk last year, Johannes and I were talking about the theme for this year. He'd asked me to help with the CFP, and I responded with a page or so of listing off all of the different ways that I could think of interpreting sex and space, or at least all the ones that I found personally interesting. You've all read that list, because to my surprise, he liked it enough that it became this year's CFP pretty much unedited. I'd like to riff off that list and explore a few aspects of some of those spaces in this talk.

Sex gets used a lot in the worlds of design and architecture, as a descriptor, but it basically never refers to actual sex, just to the creation and consumption of desire in the context of capital. Urbanism, architecture, and, to an even greater degree, industrial design are concerned with this kind of creation and consumption of desire, to an increasing degree. The logic of the market across all of these industries has pushed the value of the blockbuster and of lifestyle consumption, in the same way it's happened across the rest of the media-industrial complex. That means that alternate constructions of architectural value, beyond just satisficing or optimizing for the task at hand — beauty, durability, humanity — the quiet virtues — have been pushed out. Sexy actually means novel and of the moment, which isn't exactly the basis of a good long-term relationship.

As a bit of a tangent, it's interesting to note how this same use of sexy carries over into industrial design in the context of sex toys. The design of a high-end vibrator shares more styling cues with a high-end piece of consumer electronics, like a smartphone or the remote for a Bang and Olufson stereo, than it does with a lower-end sex toy — smooth, clean lines, an explicitly overemphasized attention to ergonomics, carefully deployed styling details to emphasize craftsmanship, a mixture of expensive materials and surface finishes — matte silicon and polished stainless steel... Apparently signaling class is stronger and more important than signaling sex, even for sex toys.

For all this use of sex as a marker for displaced desire, we as a larger culture are really squeamish about the interaction with sex and public space. At best, we wall it off into little ghettos where it's tolerated, always at the edges, seedy. So, what would happen if we made sex something other than sublimated desire? Any action we take as citizens of some city creates spaces in to that city, the places where that action takes place. What would happen if we made sex less of a marked-category, and more just a thing that people who like each other happen to do? Like brunch. Brunch and fucking.

This creation of spaces doesn't happen in a vacuum, of course — it's one of the ways that the larger culture patrols and enforces morality. If a city doesn't make room for something, doesn't permit room to be made for something, it resists that activity happening. This consensus reality is the material expression of heteronormative patriarchy. Some deviances from norms are good, some are bad; only some kinds of sex are supported, only some kinds of relationships are allowed, only some kinds of intimacy are afforded.

Affordances are a concept from cognitive psychology that's spread across a number of disciplines. They define the actions that an object allows or supports; the same concept can apply to a door (do you push it or pull it?) or a city. Affordances are a great lens for looking at the world around us and figuring out where we'd like to push or pull on it, to make new space for ourselves, new space for alternate identities that we might want to express.

We see this interacting with intimacy in a purely geometric fashion. As an example as part of his work on architectural patterns, Christopher Alexander figured out that there's a specific size range that works best for a balcony, if you want it to feel both human and alive, and intimate — it needs to be about five or six feet deep. Less than that, and there isn't enough space for a more than one person to feel comfortable there, and more than that and, especially if it's covered, it becomes too much of its own room, and feels less alive and less supporting of intimacy in part through what it does to the space behind it.

Looking at sexual identities, imagine a world where furies were taken more seriously as members of the larger community — what happens when you re-engineer public transit to be easier for people wearing fur-suits, or who have tails? Especially if those tails are biomechanical grafts, instead of just garment-like pseudo-prostheses? That standard fiberglass bucket-seat design doesn't work nearly as well — instead, maybe we swap out some portion of them for an open-backed leaning chair that has the added benefit of support a higher rider-density.

As another good example, take full-time DS relationships — how many places actually support them, explicitly, outside of places which are actually sex/fetish clubs, or, like Wicked Grounds, might as well be? What's the DS couple who'd like to go out for dinner at a nice restaurant where one member of the party will be eating from the floor to do? It's not like we can say that as a society we don't support relationships with this kind of explicit power dynamic at all — look at the traditional position of women in marriages, and you've got a situation at least as disempowering. However, we can't bear to create spaces which make that kind of power dynamic visible, because then we might see it in places where we're trying to pretend it doesn't exist.

Children's sexuality is another thing we try really hard, as a society to pretend doesn't exist. We're not doing kids any favors to force them to find spaces around the edges of their worlds to have sex — instead of stopping anyone, we just make that aspect of their lives uncomfortable, shameful, and possibly dangerous. Where are the love hotels for middle schoolers? Why do kindergartens and elementary schools have nap rooms but no masturbation rooms?

Likewise, why hasn't the Catholic church gone ahead and installed multi-purpose sex furniture in their Sunday schools?

Ok, that last one was a bit low, but seriously, sex furniture is fascinating. It's sold to couples, generally — not that many people are buying it for their one-night stands — and as a result the marketing has more in common with partners yoga than it does with more standard sex toy marketing. In the furniture, we see a direct, physical representation of the shapes of the kinds of sex the furniture makers think their target market thinks they want to have. To the extent that it matters — people have

managed to have all kinds of sex for a long time without particularly needing special \$500 pillows for it — the furniture does act to shape desire in space.

The shape of available housing is a much more concrete limit on the kind of relationships we can have. If you don't have a traditional family structure, you literally don't fit into the houses that are available. For instance, where does a poly quad live? There aren't that many four bedroom apartments, and they're usually built with a large master bedroom and then smaller bedrooms, for kids — a four-way even split is pretty rare. The distribution of social space is going to be wrong, too. Honestly, we don't really know what housing for a poly family should look like, in the way that we've had many, many years to evolve the structure of space for "traditional" families. Likewise, what if you have three or four single mothers banding together to raise their kids. They might want a space where they each have something like a small private apartment, but then with a shared living room and kitchen. At best, they might be able to find a few one-bedrooms that are next to each other in the same building, and even that's really hard to find.

Another interesting kind of sexual space is the space that a long-distance relationship occurs in. Carbon footprints be damned, we're becoming a more mobile species at an impressive pace. The relationships don't have a space in our environment, though. Where are the love hotels for long distance relationships? We already have the video conferencing technology to build a seamless-looking room that's located half in one country, half in another — coordinated furniture, lighting, decor, high resolution projection walls and well-tuned array microphones, soon to be available in glasses-free 3D. Why not have a chain with identical rooms, all around the world, available by the hour any time of day or night? In most business meetings, no one really actually wants to see the people on the other end of the phone, so why not use the technology for the people who really do?

One of the interesting virtual spaces which we already see overlaid on our cities is the Eruv. In Orthodox Judaism, the faithful are forbidden from carrying objects with them on the Sabbath if they leave the courtyard of their house. This would be inconvenient, to say the least. The requirements for what a courtyard is are pretty specific — multiple houses can be included, and there has to be a barrier, at least ten “tefach” high, around them. It turns out that this barrier can just be a piece of string, run from lamppost to lamppost, creating a virtual shared courtyard. These things can be huge — the biggest one in the world, in LA, covers over 80 square miles. Under some of the stricter forms of Sharia law, women are only allowed to circulate freely in the courtyards of their homes and other places protected from the male gaze. What if a city was built with a secondary circulation system, with screened flyways leaping from building to building, allowing observant women the freedom to move more widely around the city? From our perspective, we might see this as an embodiment of subservience, of a power exchange that we're not comfortable with, but it could just as easily be a liberation in a different kind of structure of desire. Women, free to move about their city without having to endure the destructive male gaze.

Freedom from sex and gender is one of the things we're extremely bad at providing in our environments. The pressure to perform gender is almost constant, even in nominally professional environments. It affects everyone, but the burden usually falls much more heavily on women. People who've opted out of the gender system entirely, though, face an even stronger burden, constantly trying

to fight their way out of a box that society wants to put them in. Why not have designated "no gendering" spaces, the same way we have designated no-smoking spaces? "I'm sorry, but you're not allowed to use that honorific here — please come up with another one. Come on, didn't you see the sign? It was clearly posted." One of the interesting side effects of a space like this would be to make the gendering nature of other spaces much more obvious.

On another tack, you could just as easily have "no gender performance" spaces, where not only are you not permitted to label other people's genders, you're not allowed to perform a gender yourself — in order to access the space, you have to drop all of your gender roles, all of your presentation markers, and just be a gender-undifferentiated human. Possibly, you'd need to show a card that proves that you'd received a sufficient level of gender-untraining, in order to be able to be a good citizen in the space. A-gendered people, of course, would be exempt from this.

This kind of refuge doesn't need to be limited to specific spaces, though. We understand face recognition pretty well these days, and we can do marker-less gaze tracking in free space — there are even advertising billboards which are using the technology these days, to tell when people are looking at them. Getting a computer to understand gender performance would be a bit more difficult, but you could take a first pass based on gait analysis and body shape, and probably get the first couple of nines, at least. We're also pretty damn good at making people blind these days, with laser dazzlers. Imagine a space that actively denied the male gaze — if you're performing what a targeting system decides is masculinity, you're not allowed to look at anyone who isn't. Enforced by lasers. Beyond that, imagine this built into a garment — clothing that enforces limits on the performance of gender, that denies the male gaze.

Continuing on the theme of personal enhancements, there's a lot of fascinating theory around the modern individual as a cyborg. Now, properly, we're not quite cyborgs in the traditional sense, because the intelligence that augments us isn't just ours, it's shared across the network. Additionally, as we grow this network intelligence, we're increasingly not just using technology for homeostatic functions, like the cyborg of the pacemaker, but using it to make decisions for us, often when we don't even realize that we're making choices.

This gets interesting as the network starts to get embedded in physical space and changes how we interact with that space. It's also getting pretty embedded in how we sleep with people. Something like OkCupid not only makes us explicitly reproductive network-cyborgs, but it also changes the shape of our dating space. The people we sleep with are de-localized, and institutions like bars and coffee shops become less and less places to meet people, and more places to meet up with people; the network is predetermined before physical space gets to have a say, which alters the spaces we want.

What about more explicit sexual interactions with the built environment? Last year, we had a discussion on what it would mean to fuck a building. We came up with a few examples, but they were all pretty indirect — cast silicon dildos in the shape of phallic towers, vibrators driven by 3D scans of neighborhoods. What if we explicitly afforded public sex with buildings — a row of orifices and

protrusions, built into load-bearing walls? Surely we're not so squeamish as to deny the archisexual a meaningful relationship with their lover?

On the same track, can someone be in a DS relationship with a building? In Europe, a lot of hotel rooms have a slot that they ask you to put your room key in to turn on the lights, to keep you from leaving the lights in your room on while you're not there. Imagine the same thing on a building wide scale, with a slot that a person fits in — in order for the building to function, the person is kept in an infrastructural bondage. At a certain point, this becomes a kind of advanced form of objectification — being remade not just as an object, but as a public utility.

Speaking of public utilities, the question I want to leave you with is: What would sexual infrastructure look like? Can you sleep with a SCADA system, like the ones that are used to run large industrial installations and the power grid? With the new smart grid that's being implemented for electricity, can we have a sexy grid, too?

Thank you!

Questions