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What's Love Got to Do With It? Lust in Architecture

We must stop despising Desire...

We must face up to lust in full consciousness.

*We must make of it what a sophisticated and
intelligent being makes of himself and of his life;*

we must make lust into a work of art.

— Valentine de Saint-Point, “Futurist Manifesto of Lust”

LUST EXISTS:

I joined architecture because of a lust for spaces. Sure, discourse provoked me, allowed me intellectual access to my attraction. But consider that architects, rather than being builders who theorize, might simply be space fetishists with a complex disciplinary post-rationalization. Throughout modern practice, architecture has distanced itself from the pursuit of pleasure by claiming allegiance with rational objectives. The systematic avoidance of this topic leaves us without a vocabulary with which to discuss this fundamental aspect of architectural inspiration, unable to communicate about what we feel.

I cannot prove conclusively that every architect harbors a lust for spaces, but I see it busting out all over the profession surreptitiously. Sometimes it emerges in an attraction to a “surface effect,” ornamentation, shape, texture. Sometimes it appears in spatial configurations, snugly fitted enclosures, playful adjacencies or dramatic narrative sequences. We describe certain architecture in terms of its exuberance (Miralles/EMBT’s Scottish Parliament), but even from the most restrained modern lineage, we still see enthusiastic theatricality (Siza’s Portuguese Pavilion).

What’s wrong with space lust? Lust is amoral. It is an impulse, an itch that we can scratch or ignore. We may choose to acknowledge it, address it, reject it, or pursue its fulfillment, but at root, it precedes understanding. Lust suggests the object of imagination, which is latent until the act of designing. Is space lust a fetish? To import the term fetish into any theory is

1 I like the way this space makes me feel, and also the photo. It does not have curves that look like a sexy body, but I feel an impulse toward it.

to address the discipline's margins.¹ Lust is irreconcilable; we cannot admit a basic drive to see our imaginations manifest as buildings while maintaining a pretense to purely rational aims. Lust is beyond discourse.

Any trip to a common priest or psychiatrist will demonstrate a basic fact of human existence: it is not obvious what to do with lust, *the right thing* to do with lust. It is not clear how we should control it or harness it productively. In the still-dominant academic culture of third-wave feminism, we understand that it is good to move toward lust, to seek satisfaction, to trust in the wisdom of our urges. As long as there are no children or unwilling victims, it is not only desirable to pursue one's lusts, it is the basic obligation of a fully-developed adult.

LUST IS INESCAPABLE:

The architectural profession has gone to extreme lengths to cover the tracks of its lust. Joshua Prince-Ramus, architect of the Seattle Central Library (formerly of OMA and now Principal at his own firm, REX) claims to follow a "hyper-rational" approach in his practice. The library is not an object of desire, but a spatial representation of a natural way to organize the program—a practice that in Prince-Ramus's words, allows the building to become "literally the diagram" of the program.² The claim of a hyper-rational process forces a sense of determinism, subtracts the architect from the picture, and displaces the agency of the architect. But it is also difficult to accept that as an explanation, considering the very basic subjectivity of the analytical process that *preceded* the rational diagramming. Even the value of efficiency is not universal

or self-evident. The practice of architecture is *based on* decision-making, both the science and the art. On the simplest level, lust guides the decisive mind.

There is no reason to take the claim of hyper-rationality at face value. This explanation is salesmanship, advertising legitimacy while obscuring fundamental motivations. The lust of architects for the spaces they design is unquestioned because it stays unmentioned, neatly maintained as a professional split personality between the rational (explainable) and the artistic (unutterable). Even amid economic exigencies, the creative, ambiguous space cleaved open by the architect creates opportunity for the fulfillment of personal and idiosyncratic visions. Architects will never be fully honest about this in public, among clients and investors, but all involved parties have a right to demand architects' self-awareness of the matter.

As a person wandering through the Seattle Library, I cannot imagine it designed without a bid for pleasure. While these pleasures *may* align with the library's mission, they need not be institutionally sanctioned or

even recognized. In a talk given to a creative-class audience (not a paper in the discourse), Prince-Ramus mentions a corner designed as "the place we put into the building so I could propose to my wife."³ Note the use of the plural—the team made a decision based on the team's desire. This was not a singular man's self-serving and romantic agenda.

The view, the narrative sequence, the feeling of privacy amid public exposure, the acoustics, the feeling of your shoes on



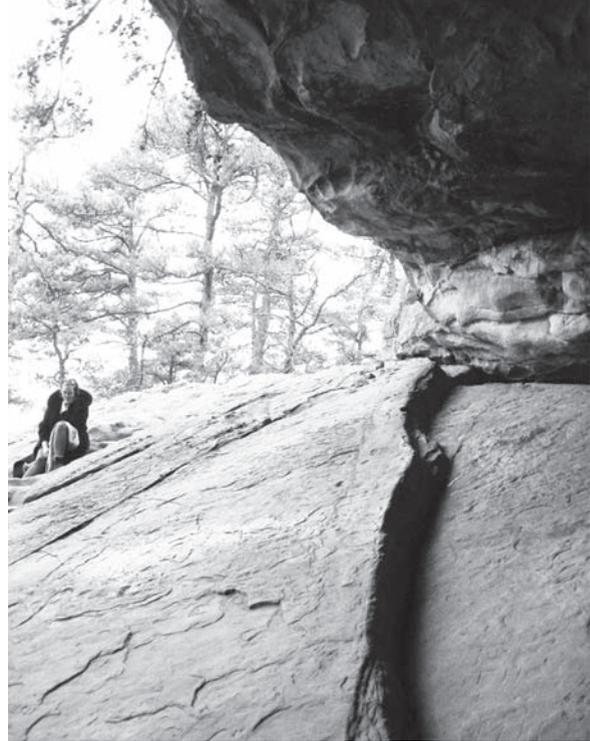
the linoleum, the color of the wall, the quality of the light through the mesh on a reading table: why not recognize this manifestation of space lust for what it is? *There are no rational metrics to optimize these features.* The production of lust-worthy space is a non-rational pursuit but I personally believe that it has value.

At some level, we are all always designing spaces to propose to our girlfriends in, or we should be. All design is based on lust, be it sublimated, directed, fulfilled, repressed or rejected. For architects whose job it is to professionally manifest the results of our imaginations, we need to have fluency in communicating about our basic desires (*fig. 1*).

SOMEONE IS USING SPACE LUST: COULD IT BE ME?

The danger of ignoring our own lust in our methodologies is that it never goes away. We are left without tools to examine the role of our still-present drives, to the extent that we embrace or resist them, or even acknowledge them. There is no inherent sin in pursuing the creation of pleasure-giving spaces, though discourse still resists. As Bernard Tschumi reminds us, “for many generations any architect who aimed for or attempted to experience pleasure in architecture was considered decadent.”⁷⁴ Tongue-in-cheek decadence comes in and out of phase with discourse, but its object is never looked upon squarely.

Of course, this isn’t easy or even theoretically possible. “Pleasure does not readily surrender to analysis.”⁷⁵ The analysis of pleasure is an orthogonal issue. *Before* pleasure comes a drive toward pleasure. What could an intelligible expression of lust look like in an architectural presentation? A groan? A poem? In this sense, expression of space lust requires that we stretch acceptable practice to include, potentially, such forms of communication. In this sense, expression of space lust is a “displacement of regulatory discourses.”⁷⁶ We accept the “user” as a subject but pretend to reject the architect. In the creation of architect-subjects through a highly disciplined educational and professional process, some people will become architects and some will even see their lusts manifest. “The qualifications for being a subject must first be met before representation can be extended.”⁷⁷ What this means for nascent subjects, architects, is that when their *expressions of lust* are rejected by juries or peers, their entire status as valid subjects is refuted.



2 This cave with many architecturally compelling qualities served as a hideout for robbers of the wild west Belle Starr and Jesse James. While I do not subscribe to the ideology of the programmatic uses, I feel compelled toward the space.

In the dense history of the study of desire, the lessons of the 1980s tell us that lust itself derives from the continual transgression of boundaries, from “ropes and rules.” Experience suggests that externally-defined boundaries are not enough to prescribe or counter-indicate desire. Perhaps transgression is not the end of the story for lust (*fig. 2*).

SPACE LUST: DISCIPLINARY REGIMES

I insist that my lust is valid, wherever it comes from. My lust on its own does not constitute an architecture, but the refutation of my lust rejects me as a subject. I reject that rejection. Today’s women have inherited a conflicted blessing: the experience of our desires’ continual delegitimation, and a sense of entitlement to them. In professional appearance, architects rely equally on the conflicting roles of logical problem-solver and mystical artist. One identity silences my lust and the other glorifies it. Both are crucial but only one are we willing

to acknowledge. With the apparatus of language to talk about lust, we *could* get to the next, and more interesting, question: how to use it.

Sexy space sometimes looks like sexy bodies. We readily accept the thrust toward desire in the fantastical computer spaces of such architects as Hernan Diaz-Alonso, who makes no secret of his lust. This architecture looks like sex, so it is paradoxically uncontroversial. Sometimes architects create sexy drawings with sensuous linework (Farshid Moussavi's work on ornament combines the artifice of affect with traditional architectural drawing typologies). Lust, in itself as a driver of design, is not disturbing when it informs an architecture of sex, only when it busts into the rational domain of buildable architecture. Spaces of lust are disturbing when they *don't* have curves, when they look like they are performing *rational* work.

Creating language about lust that is intelligible to architecture will not solve my problems, but rather shift and postpone them. It will open up interesting, new discussions. I am not advocating the pursuit of lust at any cost, or promoting it above other less controversial architectural concerns. But without *opening* a discussion on space lust, without validating a lexicon for these feelings, we cannot properly evaluate their consequences, even in the privacy of our own minds. It is desire that opens up the imagination of an impulse not yet fulfilled. This impulse, the still-formless dream, is our greatest asset. It is within this sketchy latent reality that our least rational and most visionary desires reside, our most utopian optimism.

In his annual opening address at Columbia GSAPP, Mark Wigley spoke about the persistent optimism of architecture, the insistence that another world could exist. We are co-conspirators in an irrational scheme to ignore the damning evidence around us and demand a better world. Our lusts may bring us closer to or farther from that better world, but the *practice* of lusting toward the unknown, that impulse toward an idea that doesn't exist yet, this moves us forward. As architects, we bushwhack in high grasses through uncharted territories. Our lust offers a rare map: sometimes misleading, sometimes dangerous, sometimes brilliant, but always available if we choose to cultivate it, and always true. Our lust keeps us motivated, even optimistic. "We did not come here to fear the future. We came here to shape it."⁸

Endnotes

¹ Mark Wigley, "Theoretical slippage: the architecture of the fetish." *Princeton Architectural Journal*, v.4 (1992): 88–129.

² Joshua Prince-Ramus speech, Technology Entertainment Design (TED) Conference 2006, http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/joshua_prince_ramus_on_seattle_s_library.html (accessed January 1, 2010).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Bernard Tschumi quoting Roland Barthes. Bernard Tschumi, "The Pleasure of Architecture," Reprinted in *Architecture and Disjunction* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 81.

⁵ Bernard Tschumi, "The Pleasure of Architecture" Reprinted in *Architecture and Disjunction* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 84.

⁶ Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 234.

⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Tenth Anniversary Edition* (London, UK: Routledge, 1999), 39.

⁸ Barack Obama, Speech to the Joint Session of Congress, September 9, 2009.