

SEXUALITY, SPACE AND THE ARCHITECTURAL PROJECT: A PROVISIONAL HISTORY

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Introduction

Sex, it hardly needs to be said, is everywhere. The academic world which I inhabit is no exception: people talk about sex all the time, about sexual identities, sexual difference, the representations of sex in art and literature, the legal regulation of sex, sexual morals, ethics, and etiquette, sexual violence and sexual disease, and a hundred other things to do with sex. Whether my academic colleagues ever actually *have* sex is another question. But to an outsider, my university, along with universities throughout the world might well appear to be obsessed with sex. Sex, at least in the humanities and social science areas in the Anglophone world, has arguably become the dominant topic of discussion during the past 30 years, Freud is still the starting point for many of these discussions, but it is the writing of Michel Foucault, specifically his book *La Volonté de Savoir*, 1976 (translated into English as *The History of Sexuality*) that has most defined a new area of inquiry, not to say obsession.ⁱ Foucault was troubled and fascinated by this apparently new concern for sex, and thanks to him, we largely accept the idea that for better or worse sex has become the principal preoccupation of developed world societies.

But if this is true, then where is architecture? In one sense, architecture and sexuality are fundamentally related, simply because architecture by and large frames our sexual lives, contains them, provides images of them, and to some extent limits them. The availability of private or semi-private spaces allows sexual lives to exist; their absence inhibits them. Where they exist, their character (their privacy or otherwise, their comfort, their formal qualities, their location in relation to work or home) defines the sexual lives that take place in them and inform their development.ⁱⁱ These simple facts are acknowledged by all the key figures in the history of sexuality whose work is often as much a history of architectural spaces as it is of human bodies in relation with one another. Foucault's book is a fine example. A theoretical treatise on sex, it is also a history of architectural spaces and their capacity to frame, control,

or regulate sexual activity. The home, the school, the nunnery, the mental hospital, each play a role in regulating sex, and by extension exercising a form of institutional or political power. In each case, he shows how the simplest of architectural manoeuvres – the juxtaposition of one room against another, the separation of other rooms, the placing of a wall – might be the literal representation of the desire to control sex.ⁱⁱⁱ

Freud's Vienna

Foucault's work is highly suggestive of architecture. But we really need to say something about Freud too, for whatever the status of his work as psychology, it provides an essential set of concepts to link sex and buildings. His writings on sex are as much about a city – Vienna in the early twentieth century – as they are about individual behaviours. And within that city, they are concerned with a tiny, upper-middle-class fragment of society who knew about Freud largely through word of mouth and were already temperamentally disposed to his approach and methods. Freud's clients not only came from the same social classes, but if they worked, they did the same kinds of jobs, lived in the same parts of the city, and their lives were defined by the same social conventions and the same social rituals. Freud's client base was more or less contiguous with his urban social world; his clients, to put it another way, were his city.

Vienna was – and perhaps still is - a city with peculiar anxieties about sex. Gender roles in this world were strictly defined. Domestic labour, particularly female labour in relation to child rearing, was extremely important in defining both the texture of domestic life, and the development of the sexuality of his clients. Many of Freud's male clients had their first sexual experiences with domestic servants, and talked about these experiences in analysis (consider, the 'Rat Man', who aged four or five crawls under the skirts of his nanny and touches her, apparently with her consent – the skirts as a micro-architectural space for sex, as it were)^{iv} Then there were the public spaces of the city, simultaneously a picture of bourgeois propriety and sexual license. Freud's contemporaries including his friend, the poet and writer Stefan Zweig noted the ease with which sex could be bought, yet at the same time

the overwhelming desire to keep non-normative sexual activity hidden. This tension between private and public sexuality in the city of Vienna is at the heart of much of Freud's work. Zweig described the way prostitutes in the city were available 'at every hour and at every price, and it cost a man as little time and trouble to purchase a woman for a quarter of an hour, an hour, or a night as it did to buy a package of cigarettes or a newspaper.'^v

So Vienna was a city in which sexuality was paradoxically repressed, but also sublimated; it was everywhere available, to the point at which it defines the dynamic of the street and dominates the use of its buildings, yet it must be simultaneously denied.

This understanding of the intersection between sexuality and the built environment informs this (following) famous passage from *The Uncanny* (1919) in which Freud inadvertently finds himself in an environment conditioned or defined by sexuality (an area of prostitution). It is his temporary inability to escape this condition that gives rise to the strange class of fear termed the uncanny:

'Strolling one hot summer afternoon through the streets of a small Italian town, I found myself in a district about whose character I could not long remain in doubt. Only heavily made-up women were to be seen at the windows of the little houses, and I hastily left the narrow street at the next turning. However, after wandering about for some time without asking the way I found myself back in the same street, where my presence had begun to attract attention. Once more I hurried away, only to return there again by a different route. I was now seized by a feeling that I can only describe as uncanny, and I was glad to find my way back to the piazza I had recently left and refrain from any further voyages of discovery.'^{vi}

Two problems arise from this discussion, however. If theorists of sexuality are so preoccupied with architectural spaces, they are rarely terribly precise about the spaces themselves. The spaces remain abstractions or generalisations. Precisely what these spaces are, who inhabits

them, and what they are doing to each other, often remains obscure. The spaces are *there* but remain subservient to sex, or the argument about sex.

And more importantly for you, why is it that the profession of architecture is so quiet about sex? Why is sex so obscure by comparison with other areas of artistic or intellectual activity? Why is it that in such a liberal, outward-looking and well-informed discipline as architecture, sexuality remains so coy? Why do bodies present such difficulties for architects? (think about the notorious convention in architectural photography that buildings should be represented only when free of their inhabitants). Where is the conversation about sex in relation to buildings that so obviously flourishes elsewhere? More often, modern architecture seems to be a way of repressing sexuality by imagining a world without bodies; where surfaces must be pristine, where order must rule.

Of course there are partial exceptions to this view of architecture as the site of a peculiar repression – not least in Brazil. Consider Le Corbusier's 1929 visit to Rio, in which energised by an affair on board ship with the jazz singer Josephine Baker he becomes obsessed with Brazilian women. His sketchbooks of the visit are full of mulatas, semi-clothed and naked; drawings of other subjects (the landscape, even the buildings) barely feature. His notorious 1929 plan for Rio, with its sinuous curves and openness to the land and the sea, is an attempt to represent the eroticism of his situation. But even Corbusier's work here is underpinned by an essentially repressive world view: it is only in Brazil (exotic, far from Europe) that he is able to explore his sexuality, and the plan he comes up with for Rio is – as much as it is curvaceous – an attempt to house, and thereby control an entire city population in a single megastructure. If there is sexuality in this design project, it is of a dominating, perhaps even sadistic (!) kind.

So the discussion of sexuality in architecture is fraught with problems. Nevertheless, there are instances of design projects in which a relatively open attitude to sex is present, and I will discuss two of them here as a step towards what I am calling here a 'provisional history' of the problem. To explore the problem further I have chosen to describe two private American

houses from different moments of the twentieth century, the Kings Road House by the Austrian émigré architect Rudolf Schindler (1922), and the Sheats-Goldstein House by John Lautner (1963). They do not by any means describe the whole problem. At first sight, these two houses have far more in common than they do to differentiate them. Their architects were both colleagues of Frank Lloyd Wright at different times; the houses were built for private clients with liberal social views; they occupy secluded sites in the same city, Los Angeles, a place in which social experimentation, supported by a uniquely liberal middle class, became a defining characteristic. Yet in spite of all this, the Schindler and Lautner houses can be seen as representing poles in the attitude of architecture towards sex, both in terms of the design project in each case, and their subsequent inhabitation. Most interestingly, the attitudes they represent cut across conventionally understood attitudes towards sexuality; neither house can be described as offering a straightforwardly 'liberated' or 'repressed' position. The anxieties and uncertainties in their differing approaches could be said to confirm Foucault's doubts about the repressive hypothesis – their invocation of sex does not straightforwardly mean 'liberation', in other words. But it is precisely these complexities that open up the field of sexuality and architecture for inquiry.^{vii}

The Kings Road House in detail

The Kings Road House is located in an unremarkable Hollywood suburb, and more or less invisible from the road, it reveals itself in stages. Anything but monumental, it is a series of simple one-storey rooms in concrete and wood, each looking out onto lush gardens. In plan it comprises three roughly interlocking L-shapes. In use it was meant to be, as the architect described in an important retrospective account, a 'Co-operative Dwelling'.^{viii} What was envisaged was a remarkably open house for two couples, in the first instance Schindler and his wife Pauline, and their friends Marian and Clyde Chace. The couples were on close terms. Schindler conceived the house after a camping trip, wishing to recover something of the informality and closeness to nature of that experience.

So the house is barely enclosed, and the rooms, such as they are, abandon the western convention of specialisation for particular purposes. Instead, wrote Schindler,

each person receives a large private studio, a common entrance hall and a bath. Open porches on the roof are used for sleeping. An enclosed patio for each couple with an out of door fireplace serves the purposes of an ordinary living room. The form of the house divides the garden into several such private rooms. A separate guest apartment with its own garden is also provided for (...) each room in the house represents a variation on one structural and architectural theme. This theme fulfils the basic requirement for a camper's shelter: a protected back, an open front, a fireplace and a roof (...) the shape of the rooms, their relation to the patios and the alternating roof levels, create an entirely new spatial interlock between the interior and the garden.^{ix}

What was remarkable about this house in terms of the present argument was the fluidity of the space, and the active resistance to enclosure. The most striking part of the design was the sleeping arrangements. Instead of enclosed bedrooms, Schindler built rough platforms, open, more or less to the elements. There was no wall, or door, or corridor or any other material separation between the two couples as they slept, just a distance of twenty yards or so in the night air, a more or less complete break with the conventions of the bourgeois house with its walls and divisions. The only nods to conventional propriety were the distance between the two sleeping areas, and the fact that the L's of the plan faced in opposite directions.

The precise nature of the relationship between the couples is unclear, although Schindler's erstwhile employer Frank Lloyd Wright described him as an incorrigible bohemian.^x However, what is clear is not only the flirtation with the possibility of more fluid sexual relations in the design, but also the complete failure of this project of liberation. The Chaces moved out in 1925 after only three years of cohabitation; the Schindlers split in 1926, and Pauline moved to Carmel with their son Mark in 1927. The architect Richard Neutra (with whom Schindler had a

huge professional rivalry) and his wife moved in – and out – in 1930, followed at the end of the 1930s by the return of Pauline to live in the Chace section of the house, but in infrequent communication with her ex-husband, mostly by letter despite their close proximity. This peculiar, tense arrangement, far removed from the liberatory spirit of the original house, continued until the architect's death from cancer in 1953.^{xi}

The Kings Road house addresses sexuality in some new ways. Firstly, sex is imagined as a central part of life. Secondly, sex is imagined as healthy, natural, and wholesome. But thirdly, the bringing out of sex into the open – literally here – also disciplines it in a new way. At much the same time as Schindler built the Kings Road house, the USSR was experimenting with numerous large-scale experiments in communal living. As Freud's disciple, Wilhelm Reich described in his book *The Sexual Revolution*, such experiments tended to fail in the long term as they had no place for sex; openness was proclaimed on the surface, but sexual relationships were often perceived to be a threat to the order of the commune, and the simple lack of private space a positive disincentive to maintaining such relationships.^{xii} The openness of the Kings Road House supposes an open and fluid sexuality, but in reality, the majority of its life as a home was tense and sex/less, in which the primary relationship – that of Rudolf and Pauline Schindler – had irrevocably broken down. The disastrous nature of their later relationship can be compared with the experiments in communal living described by Reich. In each case, a fluid, modern idea of sexuality is represented by the architecture, but in practice, that idea is undermined by the desire for privacy. Openness results in a curious form of control.

A similar argument can be made about the work of Schindler's rival, Richard Neutra, also Viennese and also based in LA. As Sylvia Lavin has described recently, his houses cultivate the body, and sublimate sexuality, but it is a wholesome idea of sexuality in which everything is visible, open to interrogation, and above board. There is no free play of the libido here at the 1932 VDL Research House in Silver Lake in which the architect, and two other families lived. Its openness and transparency is underpinned by new psychological theories including those which advocated a more open attitude to sex. But it is hard to imagine sex here in this

rational laboratory, with its windows everywhere, its thin partitions, and its supremely rational, sensible design.

The Sheats-Goldstein House

The second case study is another house in Los Angeles by another associate of Frank Lloyd Wright – this is the Sheats residence (now the Sheats-Goldstein house) built in 1963 by John Lautner, with modifications in the 1980s. It can be found at Angelo View Drive, high up in Beverley Hills overlooking Century City, one of LA's several downtowns. The site is a precipitous, thickly wooded hillside. The house has a complex plan on two levels. The entrance level (above) has a form roughly like two interlocking triangles;

The western triangle one houses the guest bedrooms, accessed by a concrete walkway; each room is a kind of concrete cell, faced in glass, entirely visible from the outside. Moving eastwards through the house, the other triangle contains a high living area with a pyramidal concrete ceiling; the room extends seamlessly out to a concrete deck containing a pool that reflects the city.

Built underneath the main living area is the master bedroom suite with some remarkable features: two large, leather-covered beds, one (in the form of a triangle) aligned directly with the full-length windows and the spectacular view over Century City; an entirely glass bathroom, open to view from the deck outside; windows on the wall directly above the main bed providing a view into the swimming pool. Throughout the house, spaces flow into one another; mirrors reflect the inhabitant; glass allows inhabitants to see and be seen. It is transparent, fluid, open.

Like the Kings Road house, Sheats-Goldstein makes sexuality a key part of the programme. This is a house that celebrates the body, and that puts bodies on display. Its theatrical nature is inescapable. Unlike Kings Road however, Sheats-Goldstein presents sexuality as essentially furtive. While it provides ample opportunity for the display of the body, and

numerous spaces in which sex might occur, its jokes (of which there are many) depend on understanding that sexuality is *normally* repressed. So the most sexualised spaces of the house, in the master bedroom, all play with voyeurism/exhibitionism, a duality that depends for its effect on the assumption that seeing a naked body, or being seen naked is of itself extraordinary, and by extension, arousing. This is far from the open view of sexuality represented in the Kings Road house. Also quite unlike Kings Road is the question of gender.

At the design stage, Schindler's house assumed relative equality between the couples, and between male and female (he suggested cooking become a communal activity, and built the kitchen accordingly). Sheats-Goldstein is by contrast, the ultimate bachelor pad, a place inhabited by a solitary male (in this case Jim Goldstein, a real estate millionaire) entertained by a string of younger, relatively powerless females. It is a male fantasy house from the plan up, full of masculine spaces to watch women. Its decoration by Goldstein in its current form only serves to emphasise this character; a hall of fame details all of Goldstein's past and current partners, while a naked Pamela Anderson is photographed exiting the pool. The voyeuristic qualities of the house have pedigree: the device of the pool windows is perhaps lifted from Adolf Loos's unbuilt project for a house for the African-American jazz singer Josephine Baker. Here, Loos envisaged a basement room from which (male) visitors to the house could watch Baker swimming, an explicitly erotic, exotic spectacle.^{xiii}

In the recent exhibition of Lautner's work that toured from the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles to the Lighthouse, Glasgow, the curators were anxious to draw attention to the natural world, and the architect's intervention in spectacular natural settings. The work was presented as a refined mediation between 'earth and heaven' (the show's subtitle);^{xiv} The exhibition overall was an attempt to extricate Lautner from the body. Lautner was located in the realm of high architecture, as the inheritor of the legacy of Frank Lloyd Wright, as an experimenter in pure form; nothing of the body came into it. The introductory text by Lautner himself set the tone: gracing the credits page it read 'standing on a site, I seek its particular and unique expression with all the senses until the natural setting, the character of the owners and the design harmoniously becomes a single idea.'^{xv} Here is architecture serving

the myth of modernity; architecture leaving behind earthly things to become pure form. Lautner's apparent distaste for the everyday world is manifest in the first few pages of the catalogue in an essay by Jean-Louis Cohen in which he describes his hatred of Los Angeles, the city where he in fact built his career: 'Junkland', he called it, a city 'so ugly it made (him) physically sick'.^{xvi} In Lautner's imagination, his time in LA was a protracted exile from the landscapes of his Midwestern childhood.^{xvii} He never left the pure landscapes of the Michigan peninsula. His work (according to the curators) speaks of an attempt, perhaps a forlorn one, to ameliorate the conditions of his adopted city. Sensitive to criticism, he appears to have been especially anxious to avoid any sense of capitulating to the highly commercial landscape of southern California. So even the most obviously commercial work done for various roadside restaurants in the 1950s, however spectacular, is presented as an exercise in pure form, whatever the exuberant sexuality of the surroundings.

The abstraction of Lautner, a production of both the architect and sympathetic critics, is flatly contradicted by the experience of his houses themselves. Here, an explicit concept of sexuality is at work – but it is not the sexuality of the Schindler houses, recuperated into a regime of health, and curiously de-eroticised. Neither is it the comparable sexuality of Neutra's work, in which good sex is understood as the generator of good mental health; the architect and his house acting as de facto psychoanalysts, revealing and allowing expression of the client's libido.^{xviii}

In Lautner's work, sexuality is understood as something essentially furtive, in which games of revealing and concealing are constantly played out. And it is understood as something essentially gendered, in which the male inhabitant/client is invariably looking or active, the female being looked at and passive. This is confirmed, as already indicated, by the way the present owner of the Sheats/Goldstein house has maintained and developed the house as the ultimate bachelor pad; it is certainly confirmed by the presence of the house in a 1997 movie directed by Andrew Blake, *Possessions*, in which the house is inhabited by three much-enhanced, stiletto-clad women who engage in a variety of faux-lesbian sex scenes with each other in various parts of the house. The title of the movie, and the fact that for the most

part the only characters are women makes clear the sexual politics and power imbued in the house. *Possessions* and the Sheats/Goldstein house are the subject of a later art installation by Dorit Margreiter, where the movie is projected behind a green door through which the viewer is invited to peek.^{xix} The inference is clear – whatever the heritage of Lautner’s work in the sexual liberation and experimentation of modernist LA, sex is imagined here as something essentially repressed, something that functions precisely because of its secret nature.

Conclusions

What I have outlined here are two possible positions vis-à-vis sexuality in modern American architecture. There are many more, although in some ways, Lautner and Schindler – in spite of their proximity in time and in LA – represent something like poles of what is or was possible at the time. They also clearly represent something of what might be understood by sexuality in Brazil. The inevitable reference here must be Niemeyer, who has spoken so much and so openly about sex in relation to his houses. Niemeyer’s relative openness about sex is unusual by comparison with American or European architects – yet the work, and the assumptions that underpin it are close to Lautner’s attitude. Much of Niemeyer’s production was for wealthy clients; the houses or apartment buildings are often secluded, and the concept of sexuality deployed is of a kind of liberation within certain strictly controlled, private circumstances. In fact it is the flirtation with exhibitionism – while assuming a conventional sexual context - that gives something like the Canoas house (1953) any meaning at all. It is also a thoroughly unmodernised, macho sexuality.

This attitude – what my academic colleagues in the humanities might call masculinist, or heterosexist – is marvellously satirised by Madelon Vriesendorp in a series of paintings done in the mid-1970s. Here you see the Chrysler and Empire State buildings in bed together in a post-coital scene, a deflated Goodyear airship on the bed as a surrogate condom. While the intersection between sex and architecture remains problematical, there are nevertheless cases that show a more progressive approach to the problem – and here I wonder if Brazil, in spite of Niemeyer has something to offer.

Roberto Burle Marx's 1971 reconstruction of the Av. Atlantica, for all its problems, is an important example for me of how the architectural project might incorporate sexuality in a more open way. Its problems are immense: there is no question that it frames a colossal sex industry; nor that its sexuality is highly regulated (this part of the beach for heterosexual men of a certain age, that part of the beach for young gay men); nor is it possible to deny that its dress codes are oddly restrictive, sometimes; and its famously beautiful bodies require an immense amount of labour, and denial, to be achieved. None of these things can be denied. But it is still, in conclusion, an image of what a sexually open architectural space might be; it celebrates the body in all its diversity, and it has been remarkably good at accommodating new kinds of bodies and new forms of sexuality over the years. For that reason, it is worth visiting, and revisiting.

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- ⁱ Foucault, M., *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990)
- ⁱⁱ See argument about the failure of sexual revolution in the early USSR in Reich, W., *The Sexual Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1969)
- ⁱⁱⁱ Foucault, M., *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 28
- ^{iv} Freud, S., 'A Case of Obsessional Neurosis', *The Penguin Freud Library Vol. 9: Case Histories II* (London: Penguin, 1979) pp. 41-2.
- ^v Zweig, S., *The World of Yesterday* (London: Cassell, 1943), p. 77.
- ^{vi} Freud, S., 'The Uncanny' in *The Uncanny* (2003), pp. 143-4.
- ^{vii} Foucault 1990.
- ^{viii} Schindler, R., 'A Co-operative Dwelling'.^{viii}, *T-Square*, 2, 2 (February 1932), pp. 20-1
- ^{ix} Ibid, p. 20.
- ^x J. Steele, *R. M. Schindler 1887-1953 An Exploration of Space* (Cologne: Taschen, 2005)
- ^{xi} Steele, 2005
- ^{xii} Reich, 1969.
- ^{xiii} See discussion in Friedman, A. T., *Women and the Making of the Modern House* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998)
- ^{xiv} Olsberg, N. (ed.) *Between Earth and Heaven: The Architecture of John Lautner* (New York: Rizzoli, 2008)
- ^{xv} Ibid., p. 3.
- ^{xvi} Ibid., p. 18.
- ^{xvii} Ibid., p. 64
- ^{xviii} This is Sylvia Lavin's argument. See Lavin, 2004
- ^{xix} Kunsthalle Wien, *The Porn Identity: Expeditionen in die Dunkelzone* (2009)