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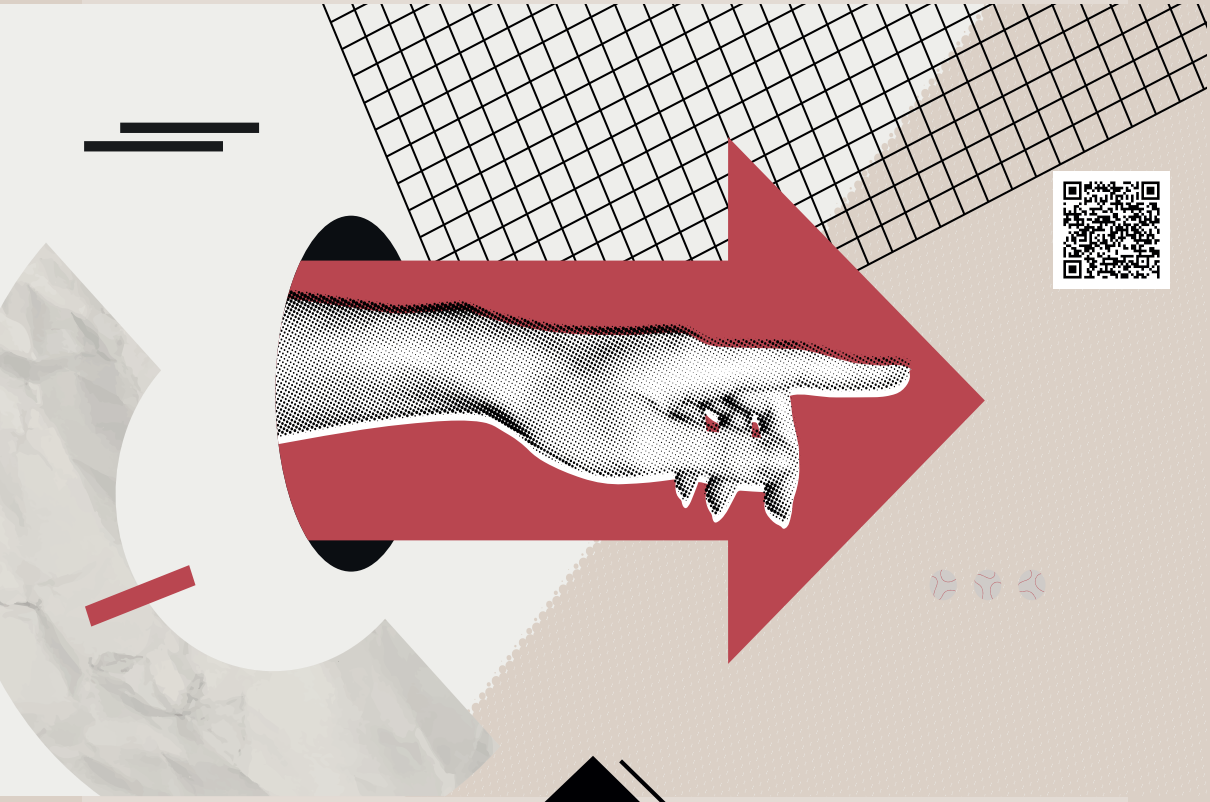
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28 November 2026

Imara A. M. Duarte
Iara Margolis Ribeiro
(Orgs.)

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01

LAV (LATENT APHRODISIAC VIRTUALITIES). DESIGN APPROACHES TO EROTIC ARCHITECTURE

Carlo Deregibus
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SUMMARY

Although intimacy plays an enormous role in people's lives, architecture has mainly ignored the role space could play in it. While the relevance of eroticism, sex and love has been traced at the urban scale, showing their relationship with cultural processes and social dynamics, the potential influence at the architectural scale has been scarcely investigated. The paper frames and organises the few approaches that can be detected in architecture when speaking of eros. It shows how they vary from very conceptual to practical, marking their theoretical background and identifying their champions, possibly arriving at clarifying the relation between shapes and meanings. In fact, the alternatives are analysed and explained using a set of diagrams showing the "paths of meanings", or the relation between the form, the expected (by the architect or others) meanings and the receiver. The three alternatives highlight how difficult it is to define erotic architecture univocally. Still, at the same time, show that some conceivable paths of meaning can, indeed, realise it. The concluding paragraph traces a possible design approach that surfs through the frame, changing the final aim, defining eros through the once called "latent aphrodisiac virtualities" and exploiting the natural potential of the form. That is, its being endlessly significant, displaying different meanings for the (informed, in this case) individual, and the rest of the casual users, in a continuous innuendo.

Keywords: erotic architecture; architectural design; Oscar Niemeyer; Bernard Tschumi, Richard Neutra; meaning, affective design.

INTRODUCTION

Eros is a paramount part of people's lives. Hence, it could be surprising that few studies inquire into its relationship with the architectural space and experience. There is indeed a pretty vast amount of scholarly works investigating feminist and queer spaces at the urban scale, building relations between groups and places (see Deregibus, 2022, for an extended review of existing studies). Yet, at the architectural scale, eros randomly appears in a few cases, with very personal approaches and reporting, usually related to one's own practice. Still, these hints offer the opportunity to set a frame of design approaches, with a better understanding of how eros interacts with architecture at various levels.

The conceptual premise is using the meaning as a guide and a detector. Eros is something that everybody experiences in their life, albeit in different ways. The *social* meaning and the collective imaginary of eros is populated by seductive bodies, double-sense jokes, public debates, and social practices. The *private* meaning is more intimately experienced in everyday life, with a more or less adventurous approach, and in the ordinary bedtime of a couple's life. These two poles are too complex to be investigated here. Still, it is paramount to understand their existence to define the different systems that play a role. In this sense, the space cannot "have" a meaning, or at least, a defined one.

Meanings happen and give life to things, exceeding them and revealing in the interaction (Luhmann, 1992; Deregibus, 2024). By contrast, meaning is not content, or something that can be transferred. Still, as we continuously attribute meanings to things, we are used to considering them as shared and widely supported, as it was transferable. Hence, it is practical to test the approach to eros and the theoretical thesis by exploring how the path of meaning should work to prove them right.

Exploring the approach to eros, three main interpretations emerge. The iconic approach bases the architectural morphogenesis on mimicking external referents: that is, on the idea that shapes can be erotic. The allegoric approach aims mainly to use shapes as a vector for non-physically referenced messages: that is, for titillating our mental, cerebral erotism. The empathic approach aspires to transform thoughts into shapes by exploiting immediate affinities and connected associations: that is, by realising individual preferences. These

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three approaches are somehow alternative to the three proposals by Donald Norman (2004) often used in affective design – the visceral, the behavioural, and the reflective ones. Yet, in the same way, they operate both at the level of design – defining alternative practices – and at the level of the signification processes – influencing how shapes and forms of architecture are intended, understood, socialised and interiorised.

THE ICONIC APPROACH

When the Italian architectural journal Domus devoted an issue to the topic of eros in architecture, director Michele De Lucchi wrote: "Organic, fluid, soft, rounded, sinuous and enveloping: these forms emanate an engaging sensuality" (De Lucchi, 2018b, p. 41). The thesis was that using curved shapes instead of regular ones, straight lines, and orthogonal planes (apparently typical of the so-called traditional architecture) would "stimulate the mind's sensory receptors" (De Lucchi, 2018a, p. 4). Sinuous shapes would be, in other words, sensual, erotic *innuendos*.

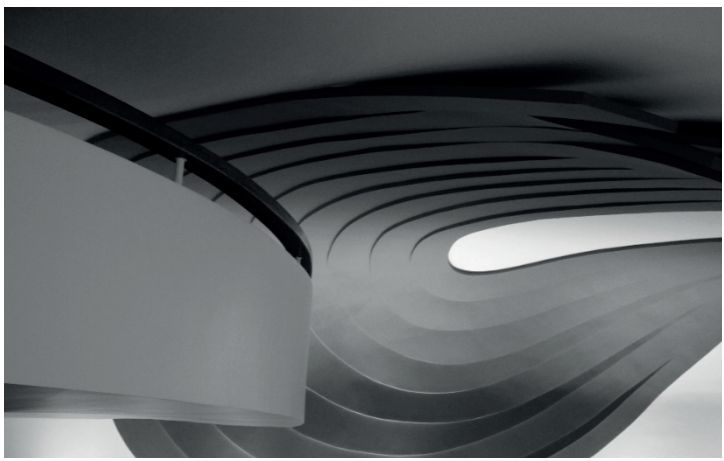
In this sense, the architectural form should mimic a natural shape, somehow letting its properties transpire through the building and becoming sensual for itself. Designing architecture with such an aim implies an iconic approach to design, where "iconic" refers to the original definition by Charles Sanders Peirce (1967): an icon is a sign capable of directly reminding something on the base of a community in some quality – a likeness. The iconic approach is vastly diffused in architecture (Sklair, 2017), yet its erotic dimension is all but obvious.

The hypothesis suggested by De Lucchi is that curves (can) have an inner erotic dimension. This thesis could find numerous historical consistencies. There are, in fact, endless examples of sinuous architecture, from Classic temples to Arabian mosques, from Gothic to Art Nouveau, from Baroque to Expressionism. In many cases, the curvature was ruled by fixed proportions. The most famous example is likely the golden ratio, with its many names (e.g., Phi, the Golden Mean, the Divine Section, the Golden Proportion, the Divine Proportion). This proportion has ruled architectural design, from the Great Pyramid of Giza to the Chichen Itza Castle. It has even literally taken shape, becoming the famous

Fibonacci spiral adopted in many Russian, Arabian and Western architectures (see Hawez Baiz & Khoshnaw, 2016).

Are these examples sensual? Indeed, sensual sinuosity has some requirements to be effective. Firstly, the curve must be sinuous but not too regular. After all, a too-perfect shape is usually related to (boring) divine proportions more than (exciting) human passions. This is why the perfectly balanced architectures by Palladio, albeit marvellous, are hardly thrilling. Secondly, the building should coincide with its free-form shape, with few or no decorations ruining its formal purity, like authentic "naked architecture" (Mosco, 2012, p. 7) – not to be confused with the "nude architecture" described by Adolf Loos used for praising dressing over adornment (Loos, 2021, p. 15) nor the "bare architecture" applauded by rationalists, willing to match shape and function in the purest possible way (Neumeyer, 1997, p. 137-143). These characters perfectly comply with the aesthetic of Oscar Niemeyer, whose sentence, "What attracts me are free and sensual curves. The curves we find in the mountains, in the waves of the sea, in the body of the woman we love" (in Petit, 1996, p. 86) is maybe the most explicit reference to sensuality as inspiration. His works reflect this passion with shapes that, avoiding nervousness, are sinuous, evocative and even allusive (Figure 1). Hence, potentially, sensual.

Figure 1. Oscar Niemeyer, Auditorio Ibirapuera, Sao Paulo 2005.



Source: Dré Batista from https://www.flickr.com/photos/drebatista/

A second, less obvious road for this iconic approach is using the human body as a reference for shapes and proportions instead of abstract curves. From Vitruvius' *De Architectura*, passing through the XVI Century Italian treatises (e.g., Leon Battista Alberti, Luca Pacioli, Leonardo, Cosimo Bartali, Alberto Durero, Ottavio Fabbri, and especially Jacopo Barozzi da Vignola and Francesco di Giorgio Martini) and arriving at Le Corbusier's *Modulor*, many theories have indeed defined the "perfect" ratios through a confrontation with the human body (see Berra, 1993; Gangwar, 2017; Sèstito, 2017). None of these proportions were considered to be seen, and, except for Modernism, a perceptive design dimension was yet to be defined. They helped set ideal relations between parts of buildings and spaces, relying on the conviction that reflecting divine proportions – which the body would reflect due to its resemblance to God – would automatically produce a *perfect* space (Imrie, 2003).

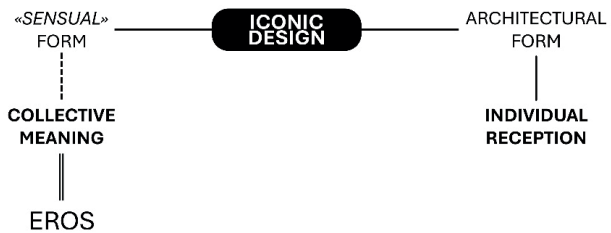
This tendency continued during the Modern. In his exposition "Architectural Nudes", Fabrizio Ferri (2004) showed statuary, monolithic and uncompromising shapes communicating the typical sensuality of the 1930s and, specifically, the "cult of the male body" typical of the nationalist parties (Campa, 2016, p.14). The catalogue cover shows the "Monument to the fallen soldiers of the First World War" in Como, designed by the futurist Antonio Sant'Elia. The work was built by Attilio Terragni, brother of the famous rationalist architect Giuseppe Terragni and, most notably, a leading member of the National Fascist Party. Obvious gender-related questions could arise: evidently, all these "ideal bodies" were male bodies, whilst women's bodies should have inspired pure and motherly love. Yet, the point is that this iconic use of shapes always favours ideal, almost unreal bodies, leaving the substantial body, made in flesh and bones, in the shadows.

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bodies, whilst women's bodies should have inspired pure and motherly love. Yet, the point is that this iconic use of shapes always favours ideal, almost unreal bodies, leaving the substantial body, made in flesh and bones, in the shadows.

These variations of the iconic approach to erotic design share the same systemic conditions when we look at the relation between form and meaning. Tracing a possible path of meaning, it is possible to highlight the expected relations between the form: hence, the reverse path that the user, as a receptor of meaning, should (unconsciously) follow to recognise the anticipated meaning of the form. The iconic approach operates as metaphoric disposal at the designer's inspirational level, relying on a series of supposed collective meanings – the equivalence between sensuality and sinuosity. Nevertheless, the transfer of the meaning is based on the phenomenon's visible qualities – that is, the architectural form. Hence, even disregarding the hiatus between the designed shape and the built one and supposing that the result of the design conception perfectly coincides with the actual building, the metaphor continues to stand for the designer. Indeed, he will always be able to follow back the path of meaning. Still, as the user interacts with the architectural form only, without knowing the metaphor conceived by the architect, the original reference is indeed hidden (Figure 2).

Figure 2. The path of meaning for the iconic approach to erotic design.



Source: diagram by the author (2025).

Therefore, a successful signification requires two factors. The first is that designers and users share the same cultural background. The meaning of eros changes through different cultures (Lingis, 1984): each will have different ideals,

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though they will consider it the only perfect one. Even if contemporary globalisation has led to a globalised ideal, the recognition of meaning depends on the relationship between *individual* experience and *collective* practices (Ostrom, 2000), thus remaining uncertain. The second factor – and even more critical in the iconic approach – is that the icon should clearly reflect the qualitative features of the referent. Hence, it must retain a strong visual relation with the physical origin of the inspiration. In other words, the "sensual" quality of the shape must stand as a collective, shared meaning, and the architectural shape must mimic the sensual one as much as possible.

Nevertheless, pairing sinuous shape and sensuality can be misleading even following these rules, and that is because meaning *always* exceeds forms (Deregibus, 2024). Hence, the shape may be sinuous but not intended to be sensual. Or it can be inspired by sensual forms without being shown explicitly. Again, the discussion on the form alone is misleading because its meaning is not univocal, and any planned or expected meaning goes through a series of passages to link the referent to the phenomenon.

As sinuous as it is, the Heydar Aliyev Centre in Baku, designed by Zaha Hadid Architects, could be considered as sensual and even inspire sensuality: yet, its conceptual origins are void of any erotism – it was hoped to recall the "eternal cycle of life" (Ayaz, 2019). The same misunderstanding could occur for almost any free-form building, from Snøhetta's to Sanaa's. Quite the opposite, when Sir Norman Foster designed "30 St Mary Axe" skyscraper in London, he did not precisely want to create an "erotic gherkin" (Macalister & Clark, 2000), but that is how it was nick-named on the base of its appearance – and this name made it so famous that it is now almost official (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Foster and Partners, 30 St Mary Axe (AKA «The Gherkin»). London 2004.



Source: Dang Khoi Ta from Unsplash

The same can be said for pieces of furniture. Carlo Mollino and many other less-known designers took inspiration from their lovers' bodies to design chairs, sofas and other pieces (Figure 4). Yet the resulting shapes recall Nordic furniture pieces by Alvar Aalto, Arne Jacobsen and many others, whose inspirations were pretty different, or their sensuality can be hidden in technical curves.

Figure 4. Cesare Monti, Shell Chair, for Reflex, 2008.



Source: Cesare Monti, https://www.cesaremonti.com/arredi

Hence, the only way to design "univocal" shapes – i.e., having the same metaphorically conceived meaning for the creator and the users – would be by using tremendously explicit forms, like in some of the highest examples of Art Nouveau, where seductive body shapes were chiselled into metal railings and stained glasses windows, or the even more explicit sculptures in Indian Temples, arriving to the so-called "phallic architectures" (see Wood, 2000; Daniélou, 2002; Williams, 2013). However, this level of explicitly would indeed be incompatible with the concept of sensuality, whose essence is allusive more than straightforward: phallic architecture is too unmistakable to be erotic.

THE ALLEGORIC APPROACH

In the iconic approach, the erotic meaning is considered a direct attribute of the shape, pairing sinuosity and sensuality. Still, is eros just related to aesthetics? Instead, it could be:

> a theoretical concept, having little in common with fetishistic formalism and other sexual analogies prompted by the sight of erect skyscrapers or curvaceous doorways. Rather, eroticism is a subtle matter. It does not mean simply the pleasure of the senses, nor should it be confused with sensuality. Sensuality is as different from eroticism as a simple spatial perception is different from architecture. Eroticism is not the excess of pleasure, but the pleasure of excess (Tschumi, 1996, p. 178).

In this sense, eroticism would have more in common with the temptation and the intimate pleasure of breaking the rules. Of doing something wrong, shocking, violent, disruptive, irrational (Weil, 1985). Of being *transgressive*, in a word. Tschumi goes even further, postulating that doing architecture means indeed operating a programmatic disjunction between theory and practice, place and use, space and conception (Tschumi, 1996, p. 55), and the only possible way to do that is being transgressive and violent. Consequently, to be such, architecture requires transgression; either it is erotic, or it is not architecture at all.

However, this idea of transgression is quite problematic. Breaking the rules requires that they *exist* and are valid and compelling. In fact, "transgression is not the negation of a prohibition, but its overcoming and completion" (Bataille, 1969, p. 71: Georges Bataille's treatise is an essential reference for Tschumi's

conjecture). A completion based on the fact that the law itself entails infractions and resulting punishments, too (Derrida, 1990). Hence, *transgression (and eroticism) requires socially recognised prohibitions*: the stronger they are, the higher the pleasure of transgression (Bataille, 1969, p. 42).

Incidentally, this means that an anarchist, negating the law, cannot be transgressive, and this is why Tschumi or Eisenman are so concerned with having intellectual recognition in the schools of architecture or architectural journals. Hence, the importance of transgression derives from the rules. The problem is that, in architecture, defining the rules is jolly difficult.

So many norms and laws concern architectural construction, yet they are not actual architectural *rules*. Not casually, Tschumi (1996, p. 108) identify the Vitruvian trio of *venustas*, *firmitas* and *utilitas* (commonly translated as beauty, firmness and functionality) as reasonable general principles. These principles permeate and sustain all architectural theories (and practices), as they were foundational. But is transgressing them even possible?

The first possibility would be stopping chasing *venustas*, as "beauty must be pursued [just] for the sake of corrupting it" (Bataille, 1969, p. 154; Georges Bataille's treatise is an essential reference for Tschumi's conjecture). This seems the easiest transgression, yet it is indeed challenging. *Venustas* is not merely beauty but the correspondence between aesthetics and physical elements – the classical orders being the easiest example. Any aesthetic requires this consistency to be such. Even an anti-classical or anti-modern aesthetic, such as that proposed by deconstructivist architects like Tschumi, relies on its aesthetic dimension to express meaning. Hence, transgression refers to a dominant paradigm. But what happens when the transgression itself becomes a rule, like in many deconstructivist cases (Figure 5)?

Paradoxically, transgression would require a casual, informal building where aesthetics have no sense or meaning (a questionable possibility indeed). But then, such a building would not be considered architecture...

A second possibility would be opposing *utilitas* by negating the "expected" shape, the very one usually associated with the use of that building (Tschumi, 1996, p. 55-73). This option is questionable from two points of view. On the one hand, besides aesthetic expectations, the building will be used in any case. After all, the Acropolis Museum by Tschumi is, indeed, a museum.

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Figure 5. Frank O. Gehry, Walt Disney Concert Hall. Los Angeles 2003.



Source: Volker Ahrens from Pixabay

A striking and extreme case could be the *Vitra Fire Station* by Zaha Hadid or *House V* by Peter Eisenman, famous for being almost unusable. Yet, they are used, indeed, even if not in the anticipated way. On the other hand, form and use have always been disjoined, their unity being just a modernist concept. As famously exemplified by Rafael Moneo (1985), it is indeed possible to redesign a building while retaining its values. But if this were true, why should the disjunction be *violent*?

In any case, if the first and second Vitruvian principles are challenging to transgress, the last seems quite impossible. Indeed, *firmitas* can at most be disguised, concealed in weird shapes, but then it will still be there: the building must stay on, in the end. Not casually, Tschumi tries to minimise the problem by affirming that constructive possibilities have spread so much that their relevance is consequently low (Tschumi, 1996, p. 109). Nevertheless, this is jolly different from saying that one *transgresses firmitas*. A limit case can be ephemeral architecture or tactical urbanism. Still, the concept of life-cycle clarifies that it is not the firmitas that changes but the planned duration: firmitas continue to stay *within* the design conditions.

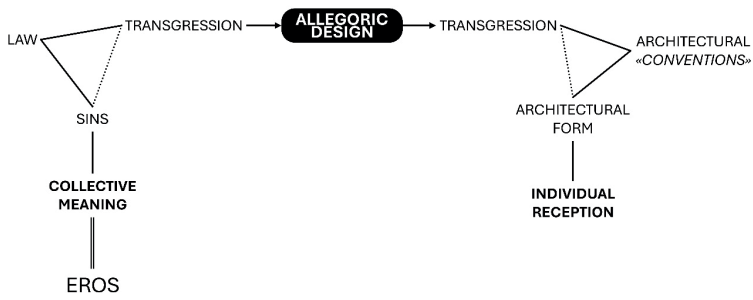
Therefore, it seems that the "rules" to transgress are more similar to the ordinary practices than proper laws: just like Bataille defined Marquis De Sade as an opponent to the ordinary man, the transgressive architect is a designer of out-of-ordinary buildings (Bataille, 1969, p. 189). This is the idea of Luca Molinari when he says that "conceiving erotic architecture today calls for a striking

gesture that is necessarily unsettling, because it goes against the times we live" (Molinari, 2018, p. 46).

A similar concept leads Kosep Mias to consider Eric Miralles' works, notoriously hermetic, as erotic (Mias, 2015). As his buildings are so tricky to understand at first sight, users must explore them gradually, discovering their spatial sense until they (possibly) understand them. In Mias' critique, this process metaphorically recalls a seductive undressing, having a far more erotic charm than the "epidermal" experience given by immediately understandable spaces (Piñón, 2019). This is the view of eros used in some scholarly works, too, where the link between architecture and eroticism is entirely, albeit seemingly unconsciously, allegoric (Dayer, 2007).

These approaches share what we can call an allegoric approach to eroticism in architecture. Allegory is an expression of a sudden intuition, a narration that indirectly recalls a set of conventions to which it relates and that sets its meanings. Its understanding depends on the distance – in terms of time and culture – between the receiver and the allegory, as the interpretation relies on these unexpressed, temporary substrates (Cowan, 1981). Here, the erotic meaning is not related to *something* but to the *concept of the pleasure of sin*, which we all know just from having grown and lived in a world of rules. Consequently, for the referent, the path of meaning should pass from experiencing architectural forms to understanding that they somehow defy some norms, then through an analogy between this defection and the transgression of a law that leads to sin, should arrive at eros (Figure 6).

Figure 6. The path of meaning for the allegoric approach to erotic design.

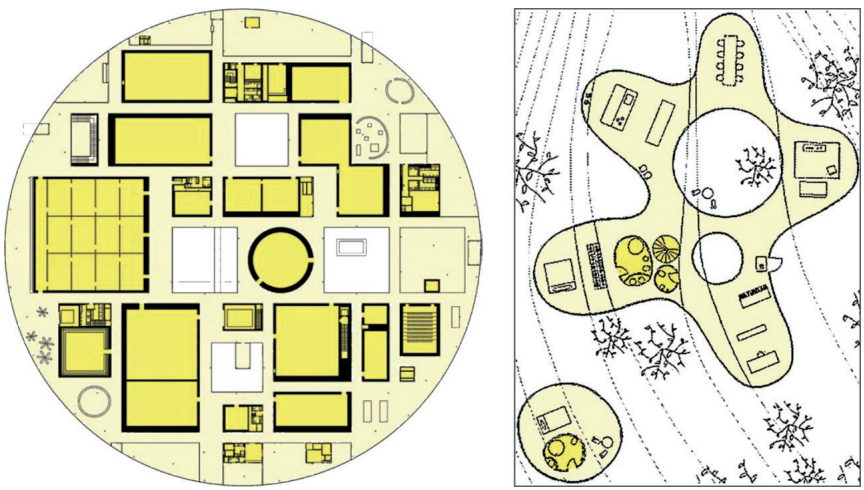


Source: diagram by the author (2025).

Following the path requires an erratic set of multiple analogies, even subtler and inevitably more tentative than the metaphor(s) of the iconic approach. Consequently, meaning effortlessly fades into a dialectic dimension. That is why, in the aforementioned Domus issue, the introduction by De Lucchi praises an iconic approach, whilst many of the contributions exemplify allegoric approaches. And why most of these allegoric approaches are generic or purposefully idiotic – like proposing literally white buildings against *green* building design (Rahm, 2018).

The allegoric approach ends in opposing dominant trends, as they were laws. Still, the distinction between ordinary and transgressive, between law and sins, is, *in any case*, self-referential to the system (Luhmann, 2002). Only, in the case of architecture, the system to which formal rules refer is the project itself (Eisenman, 2009). This is why the approach is allegoric: allegory requires a personal, situated involvement, and changes depending on the conditions of the referent (Cowan, 1981), precisely like eroticism, which requires "a personal experience, identical as contradictory, of both rules and transgression" (Bataille, 1969, p. 42). Therefore, for Kosep Mias, Miralles' hermeticism may appear transgressive as, for a user, it may be irritating – and the same can be said for Sanaa's programmatic free plans (Figure 7) or Calatrava's uncompromising design.

Figure 7. SANAA, 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa 2004; Flower House, Lens 2005.



Source: Alfirević Đorđea & Simonović Alfirević Sanjab (2016). Interpretations of Space Within Space Concept in Contemporary Open-Plan Architecture. *Arhitektura i urbanizam*, 42, 24-40.

Therefore, an architect can transgress. We could even postulate that, just by designing, any architect ontologically transgresses the existing situation. Yet, architecture cannot be univocally transgressive *for the referents*: it will be such only for those whose individual experiences will display the path of erotic meaning.

THE EMPATHIC APPROACH

Though differently, both the iconic and the allegoric approaches share a social conception of eroticism. They try to inspire meaning through a form relying on the likely ability of people to decipher all the logical sequences that inspired the design, and we have seen that this path of meaning makes the perception of eros jolly erratic for the users. Nevertheless, another possible approach is to reverse the perspective, starting from the user and his experience. This is the core of the long-established phenomenological tradition, from the historical theories by Steen Eiler Rasmussen (1957) or Ernesto Nathan Rogers (1958) to the recent efforts of Juhani Pallasmaa (1996) or Peter Zumthor (2006).

Yet, rarely have these approaches looked at the user's actual, factual approach to eroticism, most of them relying on a poetic, evocative and ephemeral dimension conjured by the architect as he was a diviner (Perez-Gomez, 2006). A notable exception is Richard Neutra, who, in 1940 (in an essay, *Empathy-infeeling*, remained unedited until 2004), tried to scientifically define empathy as the way to radically change the modernist approach to design while retaining its scientific side.

Empathy can be considered a far-reaching physiological function (with many neuro-cerebral implications) that can work only briefly during the reciprocal stimulation between individuals (Lavin 2004, p. 33-34). As the resonance between the space and the person relies on the most profound and most obscure preferences, thoughts, convictions and even prejudices of individuals (Zumthor, 2006, p. 21), the architect can tentatively explore these dimensions by activating what we can now call an empathic approach to create therapeutic environments that positively stimulated the body, the mind and the spirit. This approach can positively be applied to eros. Indeed, Neutra acted as a true psychoanalyst, investigating the most intimate and reserved aspects of his client's private lives by conducting extended cognitive interviews and questionnaires, using the project as a therapy for their conscious (and unconscious) fears and desires. These

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experiences were the basis for his main 1954 book, *Survival through Design*, where design's scientific and psychological dimensions were much deepened, and for his masterpieces (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Richard Neutra, Entenza House (AKA Case Study House #9), Los Angeles 1949.



Source: James Vaughan from https://www.flickr.com/photos/x-ray_delta_one/4294006163/

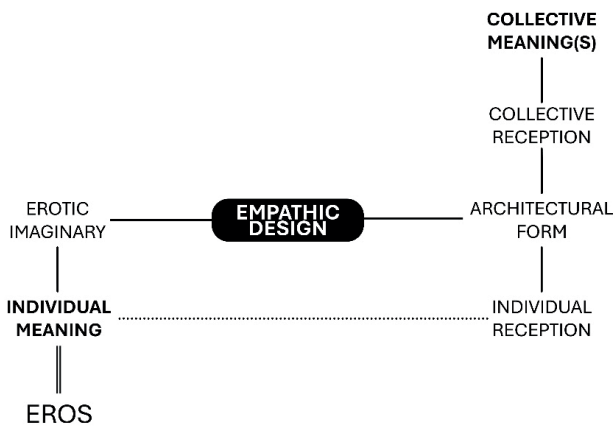
Although potentially decisive, the empathic approach is hard to apply. Dealing with individuals' most profound feelings and thoughts requires a psychologic competence or, at least, sensibility, far from the commonly expected competencies of architects. For instance, according to the so-called Control Mastery Theory (Weiss *et al.*, 1986), at the base of arousing is the possibility for one to feel "safe". Confusing enough, this requires experiencing conditions which disconfirm one's deepest pathogenic convictions. Hence, the brain continuously generates sexual fantasies to create virtual stages to feel safe by negating fears and doubts, whilst living its desires. The actual experience of eroticism and intimacy is deeply influenced by the adherence of places to these stages (Bader, 2002, p. 160).

Unfortunately, fantasies are created mostly unconsciously: imagination cannot be controlled, after all, and the human brain performs them without even activating its conscious regions (Lewis *et al.*, 2000). Hence, rarely do people become aware of the physical dimension of these fantasies, or the architectural features that make a place erotic for them – after all, "meaning always depends on the patient" (Bader, 2002, p. 83). Furthermore, this psychological theory aims

at the individual, but intimacy typically concerns couples (variously fixed or formalised). Therefore, an empathic erotic place should meet both individuals' unconscious conditions for feeling safe in experiencing their erotic preferences, making them converge. A nearly impossible task.

Thus, empathic design intends to see eros as intimacy, unveiled and fulfilled through architecture. The individual meaning – what is erotic and the spatial condition for an erotic stage – is at the beginning of the process. Hence, it can be recognised in the architectural form, but just by the very individual – or other individuals with similar meanings. This leaves space for the multitude of meanings that overlap on the form, letting the form resound the social meanings – which so strongly influence even the clients' choices when designing their houses (Deregibus, 2022) – whilst they reflect the most intimate meanings in a subtle, unobvious way (Figure 9).

Figure 9. The path of meaning for the empathic approach to erotic design.



Source: diagram by the author (2025).

The peculiar approach of Neutra has been read as a forerunner of somaesthetic architecture (Shusterman, 2012; Nanda *et al.*, 2013) and environmental design. The first elaborates on the physiological dimension of bodies to stress a critical relation between place and senses. The second works on the so-called person-environment compatibility (Kaplan, 1983), considering both the physical conditions of places and the patterns of information. Nevertheless, there is a

crucial difference between these approaches and the empathic design. Neutra always referred to the peculiar relationship an architect can create with his clients.

Quite the opposite, as it proved impossible to define protocols and guidelines on a case-by-case basis, environmental psychology works on general preferences and statistics. Consequently, it easily shifts toward general tips like using relaxing colour palettes, natural lighting, natural materials – whatever this means, as any construction material is far from being natural – atmospheric artificial lighting, green spaces and vast open views, and avoiding weird shapes (Bonaiuto *et al.,* 2004).

Some of these principles (like pasty colours) fall into the iconic approach, while others (like regular shapes) are into the allegoric one. Still, none of them is aimed at originating an erotic place, aside from a casual consistence with the individuals' fantasies. Indeed, they seek to create a "restorative environment" (Kaplan, 1983, p. 323) where one can find refuge from the stress of life. A relaxing place, but not (necessarily) an exciting one.

However, there is also a peculiar, even if unusual, architectural type that shows an intermediate level between the strictly individual level of the empathic approach and the collective levels of iconic and allegoric ones, and that could question this division: the love hotels. Here, the approach cannot be user-based. For obvious reasons, it must rely on a generalisation of preferences, thus proving that, even if it was impossible to give architecture a universally recognised erotic meaning, it is possible to design places able to resound with individual eroticism. The solution is to create a catalogue of alternatives. Love hotels are designed as a series of stages with different settings, more or less ordinary or fantastic, which allows people to find their preferred one.

We saw that the psychological relation between places and eroticism relies on the fact that one feels good and is *at ease* in the place, as what is transgressive for someone can be revolting, or boring, for others (Tsuzuki, 2008; 2023). Anyone can find peace and a place with many alternatives (Figure 10). However, the specific nature of love hotels depends on the expectations of people, differently from homes. Eros is the eye of the beholder, we could say: hotels provide an escape from everyday life and offer, in any case, the "change of register" that triggers the erotic potential. Hence, love hotels are *expected* to be erotic or, in any case, to offer time for an erotic experience (Deregibus, 2023).

Figure 10. The cover of the book "Love Hotels", by Kyoichi Tsuzuki (2023).



Source: seigensha.com

Many people will perhaps have general, less strict requirements to feel their eroticism reverberating in the space. Those will probably fit with the restorative trends we hinted at, but at the same time, will reduce the erotic character of architecture to its *natural* level – considering the opposition natural-erotic expressed by Bataille (1969, p. 19). Quite the opposite, unleashing the erotic potential of architecture requires an empathic approach to design to enhance individuals' unconscious preferences and desires (Deregibus, 2022, p. 133).

LAV (LATENT APHRODISIAC VIRTUALITIES)

The three described design approaches highlight some relevant points. The first is that eroticism could refer to many different concepts, going from a very physical to a very abstract level. The (consequential) second is that it is impossible to define an architecture "erotic" for itself, as its meaning depends on references and referents system. The third is that different approaches involve different kinds of experience, ranging from a public one to a very personal one – arriving at the unconscious one.

These points suggest we should look at erotic architecture as a reversed *transitional phenomenon*, using Bader's interpretation of the concept (Bader, 2002). A transitional phenomenon is an ontologically existing thing whose presence and physical dimension are known and defined. Still, at the same time, its ontological existence can sometimes be somehow suspended, with an aware, even if unconscious, act, just like in a role-playing game. The ontological existence, therefore, *flickers* depending on the individual. This definition helps surpass the traditional dualism between meaning and interpretation, negating the dualistic relation between the creator and the receptor of meaning.

Now, considering our three "champions" of the highlighted approaches – Niemeyer, Tschumi, and Neutra – it is clear that their works can be appreciated and experienced without any reference to eroticism. Yet, eros is a paramount part of their concept, and it can emerge when the individual *senses* it. A sinuous shape, a deconstructivist building, a love room are at the same time erotic and boring, disturbing and restorative, depending on how we build them through our experience. Therefore, as architects, we do not actually inscribe meanings in a form for others to misunderstand. We design spatial potentialities. The three approaches ground on the intentions of the architect, on the idea that the work of art includes a precise meaning – an idea that proved wrong or at least outmoded many decades ago in the world of art. Yet, as we saw, their efficacy is inevitably low.

Quite the opposite, a possibility to make architecture erotic is to make the space transitional and work on what Gabriele D'Annunzio (1889-1995, p. 35) once called "latent aphrodisiac virtualities" – which we'll call LAV. LAV are the spatial features that can emerge when resonating with personal preferences. They are in the space as an occasion for people to intercept the individuals' erotic responsiveness (see also Neutra, 1954, p. 150). To include LAV into architectural design, we should not consider the approach as a solution but as a technique, to be combined depending on the case. This would shift the whole question from the definition of erotic architecture to the condition for its possibility to be such.

Understanding the problems of the three approaches is paramount for this shift. The iconic approach relies on the observer's point of view, which could change a sinuous shape from being sensual to the opposite – just as a model must pose to be sensual. The allegoric relies on a cultural background, in spite of

the globalising attitude of archistars – this is why the very first deconstructivist works were so effective.

The empathic relies on building a strong relationship with the individual user – an impossible task with public or collective buildings. Yet, depending on the case, the three can be matched depending on their possible fallacies, so as to graft the potential of LAV in the design *whilst* accepting, or rather, exploiting the inevitable plurality of meanings. This balanced approach could greatly benefit a variety of situations that don't fit the existing methods – that is, almost all. In fact, whether in health clinics, care homes, hotels, real estate buildings or open spaces, it could immensely facilitate a deeper, more authentic and more intense experience of the space.

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