

Eroticism of Space

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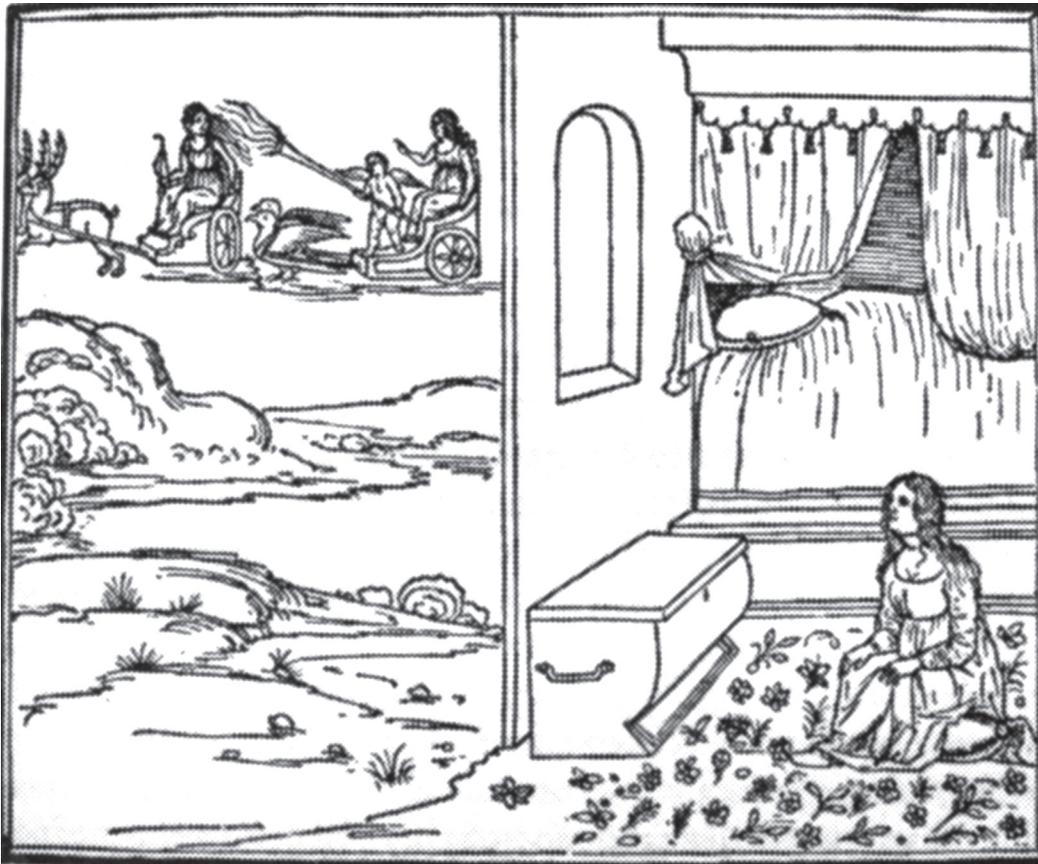


Illustration from Francesco Colonna, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*.

The erotic dimension of architecture has been the subject of literary and scholarly studies since *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499), an illustrated amalgamation of a dream-like love poem and a treatise of the secrets of ancient architecture, attributed to the Franciscan friar Francesco Colonna (1433–1527). *Hypnerotomachia* is a love story disguised as an architectural treatise in which architecture and its elements stand for the desired body of the lover. In fact, the professionalist precision of the architectural descriptions in the book has given rise to speculations that the real writer would be no one less than Leon Battista Alberti.

In mid-eighteenth century France the *petites maisons*, *residences secondaires*, or gardens and garden pavilions were favoured settings for secret love. The concise novella *The Little House* (*La Petite Maison*, 1758)¹ by Jean-François de Bastide develops the idea of architecture as a deliberately-conceived vehicle for erotic arousal and sexual seduction. This charming book is a fusion of a libertine erotic novella and an architectural treatise. Like *Hypnerotomachia*, *The Little House* is assumed to be a collaboration between a writer and an architectural scholar. The architectural expert that is suspected to have collaborated with Bastide is Jacques-François Blondel, the renowned architectural theoretician.

Anthony Vidler describes the interplay of space and erotic experience in eighteenth century erotic literature² as follows: “The role of space is crucial. In the first place, space operates to set boundaries, establish limits, and resist encroachment, in the more fundamental sense of the erotic narrative, space suspends the supreme moment for an intimacy, defending the all-too transitory act of love from time, day-to-day routine, and, of course, the inevitable process of aging. Space offers a place in which to escape from history.”

*Polyphilo or The Dark Forest Revisited: An Erotic Epiphany of Architecture*³ by Alberto Pérez-Gómez is a contemporary adaptation of *Hypnerotomachia* which transforms the enchanted forest settings of the Renaissance story into the ultimately technologized settings of international airports. The more recent study by Pérez-Gómez, *Built Upon Love:*



Jean-François de Bastide, etching.

Architectural Longing after Ethics and Aesthetics (2006)⁴ traces the mythological and historical role of eros and philia, erotic love and love for friendship, in the making and experiencing of architecture. He shows convincingly and poetically that architecture arises not from utility and reason, practicality and technique but from the desire to sensualize and poeticise the human condition. His erudite and poetic narrative helps us understand the essence of architectural pleasure and its origins in the longing for beauty.

The history of architecture includes explicitly erotic architectural projects, from the erotic facades of the Jain and Hindu temples of Khajuraho in India (around 1000 A.D.) to *The House of Pleasure* by Claude-Nicholas Ledoux (1779) with a phallic floor plan. Direct visual suggestions of sexual connotations, however, usually turn disturbingly graphic and vulgar in comparison to the hidden haptic sensuality and eroticism of space, materials and details, colours and light, that are experienced

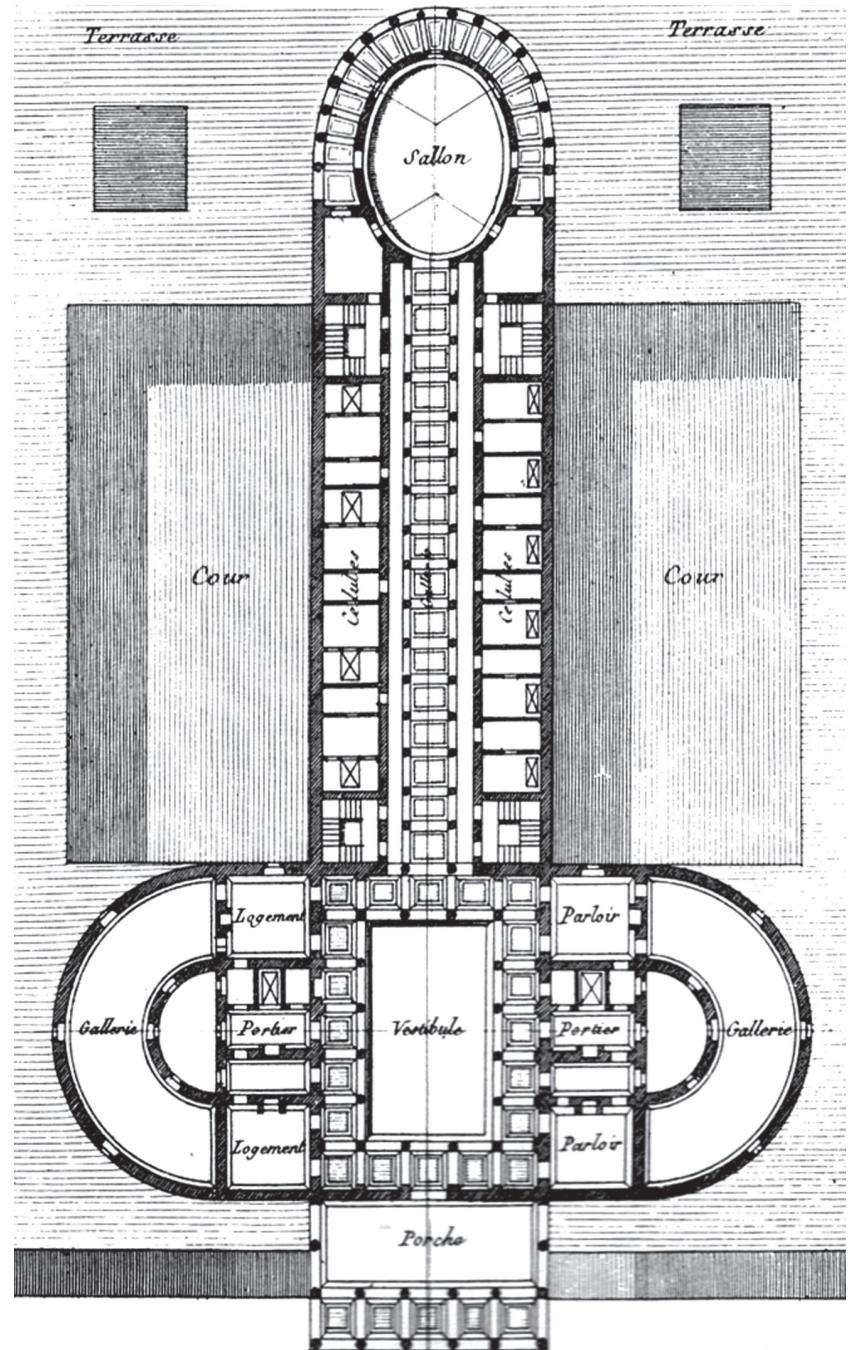
as more pleasurable and seductive. A tactile and caressingly erotic atmosphere is often evident, for instance, in the architectures of Frank Lloyd Wright, Erik Gunnar Asplund, Alvar Aalto, and Carlo Scarpa. It is thought-provoking that even vernacular Shaker architecture and objects project a subtle sensuality although such suggestions were explicitly banned in their religious doctrine.

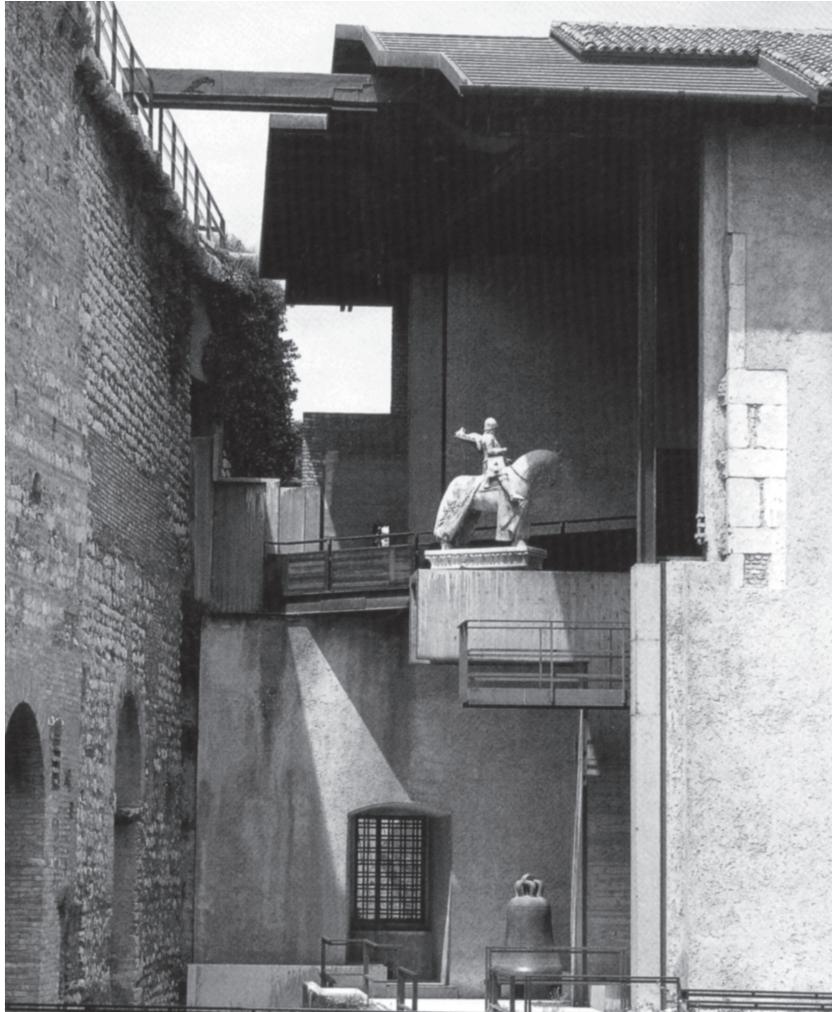
These preliminary observations guide us to investigate the relationship of architectural space and erotic air on a more philosophical level.



An erotic sculpture at the Hindu Temple, Khajuraho, India.

Claude-Nicholas Ledoux, The House of Pleasure.





Carlo Scarpa, *Museo di Castelvecchio, Verona, 1956–73.*

When discussing Paul Cézanne’s paintings Maurice Merleau-Ponty states poetically that the painter wanted “to make visible how the world touches us” through his art.⁵ In another context, the philosopher asks: “How would the painter or poet express anything other than his encounter with the world?”⁶

Like paintings and poetry, the art of architecture articulates the boundary between the perceiving and responding individual and the world. Architecture, also, expresses our encounter with the world, and articulates the way the world touches us. Buildings do not only provide physical shelter for our bodies, they also house our minds, memories and dreams. By “mixing memory and desire”⁷ architecture enables us to dwell pleasurably and with dignity in “the flesh of the world,”⁸ and to understand ourselves as complete beings.

Instead of focusing attention on itself, profound architecture re-directs our awareness back to the world and to our own life situation. Extending beyond visual aesthetics and compositional qualities, it evokes our historicity as biological, sensing and erotic beings. We dwell in physical spaces, but we also occupy mental structures and images. In addition to serving practical and instrumental purposes architectural works are complete man-made microcosms and condensed, poetised representations of the human life world. They are lived existential metaphors that guide and articulate human perception, awareness, and emotion. A great building makes us see

the majesty of the mountain, the silent patience of the tree, the interplay of light and shadow, and the smile on the face of the other. Profound architecture sharpens, focuses, and integrates our senses and enables us to see the odour of the spring, hear the tranquillity of matter, feel the tactility of light, and sense the acid taste of stone. One of the seminal tasks of buildings is to safeguard the benevolent silence of the world. Most importantly, serene architectural spaces enable us to experience the pleasure of solitude without a feeling of loneliness.

These are all magical experiences invoked by the poetic imagery of architecture that emancipates and inspires. At the same time that artistic images stimulate us to dream, they strengthen our sense of reality and of ourselves. “An image is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. Only such an image, such a poetry, could give us that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art,” Ezra Pound writes.⁹ This immediacy and liberation also characterises profound architectural experiences.

As buildings are not merely appreciated by the eyes, fundamental architectural experiences consist of distinct acts or events. They are active encounters and confrontations rather than passive observations. Spaces and structures become part of us and we fuse with them. The architectural experience of

the window, for instance, does not primarily consist of the aesthetic quality of the material object itself; the act of looking out of the window and appreciating the view outside, selected and framed by the aperture, is a genuine architectural encounter. Similarly, the mere doorplate is not architecture regardless of its aesthetic qualities; the act of passing through the doorway, the crossing of the boundary between distinct realms of space, turns into a genuine act of architecture.

An architectural space or situation is always an invitation and promise. Due to its verb-like essence and the implied bodily confrontation, it projects a fundamentally sensuous and erotic character. We embrace a space and the space embraces us. Space re-enchants, re-mythologises and re-eroticises the world, and grants our buildings their ontological pantheistic and animistic essence. As contemporary instrumentalization, rationalization, and aestheticization tend to deprive built structures of their metaphysical significance, it is the task of architecture to recharge our settings of life with meaning, and to enhance our embodied relation with the world.

Charles Tomlinson, the poet, points out the bodily basis of the practice of painting and poetry: "Painting wakes up the hand, draws-in your sense of muscular coordination, your sense of the body, if you like. Poetry also, as it pivots on its stresses, as it rides forward over the line-endings, or comes to rest at pauses in the line, poetry also brings the whole man into play and his bodily



Alvar Aalto, Villa Mairea, Noormarkku, 1938–39.

sense of himself.”¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty even extends the processes of thinking to the entire body: “The painter ‘takes his body with him’ (says Valéry). Indeed we cannot imagine how a mind could paint.”¹¹ It is similarly unthinkable that a disembodied mind could conceive architecture as buildings echo our bodily being and embodied acts in the same way that a bird’s nest is born of the body movements of the animal.

Creative work takes place in a sensitized and vulnerable mental state. The artist or architect merges with the work, and becomes the very site of his or her creative endeavour and, finally, the work itself. “Literature is made at the borderline between self and the world,” writes Salman Rushdie, “and during the creative act this boundary softens, becomes penetrable and allows the world to flow into the artist and the artist flow into the world.”¹² In the act of experiencing

an architectural entity, a similar fusion and identification takes place.

An architectural experience is indeed a magical exchange; we project our emotions and associations onto the building, and in return the building projects them back to us. When experiencing sensations of bliss or anxiety, ecstasy or grief in a space, we are, in fact, encountering our own emotions evoked by the authority and aura of the work and reflected back to our consciousness. This subtle interdependence and exchange resembles an affectionate human relationship. In an amorous relationship the boundary of the world and the self is similarly sensitised.

“He gave a like care to all the sensitive points of the building. You would have thought that it was his own body he was tending...But all these delicate devices were as nothing compared to those which he employed when he elaborated the emotions and vibrations of the soul of the future beholder of his work,” Phaedrus describes the care by which Eupalinos proceeded in his design process in Paul Valéry’s dialogue “Eupalinos, or The Architect.”¹³ “My temple must move men as they are moved by their beloved,” Eupalinos was heard to say.¹⁴ Like an affectionate human relationship, a significant architectural space stimulates and strengthens our most subtle and humane qualities.

The sensuous and erotic qualities of great works of architecture and art arise from unconscious bodily iden-

tification and delicate haptic experiences. “The skin sees...It shivers, speaks, breathes, listens, sees, loves and is loved, receives, refuses, retreats, bristles in horror, is covered in cracks, blotches, wounds of the soul...”,¹⁵ Michel Serres describes the multiplicity of haptic sensations emphatically.

Positive and invigorating spaces stimulate our muscular and tactile senses. Whereas retinal images promote distance and detachment, these haptic experiences give rise to the sense of nearness, intimacy and acceptance. Light caressing a surface and revealing its shape and texture, as well as the hapticity of matter and details, crafted to address the body and the hand, evoke an eroticized and welcoming air. The space of the home is ultimately an extension of its inhabitant’s skin, and the deepest experiences of homecoming are experiences of intimate warmth and naked skin. The union of the dweller and the house is a kind of a marriage, a relationship in which the house caresses the inhabitant and the inhabitant finds ultimate pleasure in his or her dwelling.



Antoni Gaudí, Casa Batlló, Interior view of fireplace, Barcelona, 1905–07.

The fundamental task of architecture is to support and celebrate life and give it a sense of dignity. A generous and courteous architectural space sensitizes our entire relation with the world; it tunes the senses and makes us receptive to the most subtle and fragile of sensations. A benevolent architectural space caresses and calms, energises and consoles.

“Architecture immortalises and glorifies something. Hence there can be no architecture where there is nothing to glorify,”¹⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein argues. Because of its very life-enhancing essence, the art of building can only arise from optimism and care, affection and compassion. The Patron Saint of architecture is Hope, and cynicism is surely the mental condition that erodes and eliminates the very ground of architecture. As in a loving human relationship, the objective of architecture is to emancipate the other and to defend his or her autonomy and individuality.

On the other hand, architecture can be—and indeed has been—perverted for purposes of suppression and control, indoctrination and terror. Herbert Marcuse even assumes that today’s vulgar sexuality and sexual violence are, at least partly, consequences of the loss of the erotic dimension in our technologised environments.¹⁷ Whereas the instrumentalised environments of today subdue and suppress erotic fantasy, historical spaces, natural settings and townscapes stimulate and accommodate day-dreaming.

Although profound architecture is born of the existing realities of culture and life, it always projects ideals. It does not merely reflect given conditions and objectives; it aspires for a better, more subtle and cultured way of life. In fact, meaningful architecture always transcends its given conditions and conscious intentions, and achieves more than could ever be foreseen or rationally programmed. Like love, architecture is always a gift, a gift brought about by human creativity and compassion for the other.

Idealism, optimism, justice, and hope are all emotions and experiences connected with the desire and passion for beauty. Thus beauty and imagination co-exist. A civilisation possesses hope only as far as it can distinguish between the beautiful and the ugly, and it desires beauty. Even ethical judgement is born of aesthetic desire. As Joseph Brodsky argues: “Aesthetics is the Mother of ethics.”¹⁸

Alvar Aalto spoke of “the architects’ paradise idea” suggesting that architecture should always strive for an ideal world. “Architecture has an ulterior motive...the thought of creating a paradise. It is the only purpose of our houses...Each house, each product of architecture that is worthwhile as a symbol, is an endeavour to show that we want to build an earthly paradise for people.”¹⁹ This earthly paradise is also the domicile of both Eros and philia, the two modes of love.

Notes

¹Jean-François de Bastide, *The Little House*, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996).

²Anthony Vidler, “Preface,” *The Little House*, pp 11–12. Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Polyphilo or the Dark Forest Revisited: An Erotic Epiphany of Architecture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: The MIT Press, 1992).

³Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Built Upon Love: Architectural Longing After Ethics and Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: The MIT Press, 2006).

⁴Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt,” *Sense and Non-Sense* (Evanston, Ill., Northwestern University Press, 1991), p 19.

⁵As quoted in Richard Kearney, “Maurice Merleau-Ponty,” in Richard Kearney, *Modern Movements in European Philosophy* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1994), p 82.

⁶T.S. Eliot, “The Waste Land,” in T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p 23.

⁷Merleau-Ponty describes the notion of “the flesh” in his essay “The Intertwining—The Chiasm” in *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed Claude Lefort (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, fourth printing, 1992). ‘My body is made of the same flesh as the world...this flesh of my body is shared by the world...’ (p 248); and, ‘The flesh of the world or my own is...a texture that returns to itself and conforms to itself’ (p 146). The notion initially derives from Merleau-Ponty’s dialectical principle of the intertwining of the world and the self. He also speaks of the ‘ontology of the flesh’ as the ultimate conclusion of his phenomenology of perception. This ontology implies that meaning is both within and without, subjective and objective, spiritual and material. See Richard Kearney, “Maurice Merleau-Ponty,” in Kearney, *Modern Movements in European Philosophy* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1994), pp 73–90.

⁸As quoted in J.D. McClatchky, “Introduction” in J.D. McClatchky, editor, *Poets on Painters* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1990), pp 187–188.

⁹Charles Tomlinson, “The Poet as Painter,” in McClatchky, *Poets on Painters* (Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1990), p 280.

¹⁰Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception* (Evanston, Ill., Northwestern University Press, 1964), p 162.

¹¹Salman Rushdie, “Eikö mikään ole pyhää?” [Isn’t Anything Sacred?] (Helsinki) Parnasso 1:1986, p 8., Tr. Juhani Pallasmaa.

¹²Paul Valéry, “Eupalinos, or the Architect” in *Paul Valéry Dialogues*, trans. William McCausland Stewart (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956), p 74.

¹³Paul Valéry, “Eupalinos”, *ibid.*, p 75.

¹⁴Michel Serres, *Le Cinq Sens* (Paris: Grasset, 1985), pp 338 and 348. As quoted in Pierre von Meiss, *Elements of Architecture* (London and New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold International, 1990), p 19.

¹⁵Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, Georg Henrik von Wright in collaboration with Heikki Nyman, editors (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p 74e.

¹⁶Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), p 73. “... The whole dimension of human activity and passivity has been de-erotised. The environment from which the individual could obtain pleasure—which he could cathect as gratifying almost as an extended zone of the body—has been rigidly reduced. Consequently the ‘universe’ of libidinous cathexis is likewise reduced. The effect is a localization and contraction of libido, the reduction of erotic to sexual experience and satisfaction,” Marcuse argues in psychoanalytical terms.

¹⁷Joseph Brodsky, *On Grief and Reason: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), p 49.

¹⁸Alvar Aalto, “The Architects’ Conception of Paradise” in Göran Schildt, editor, *Alvar Aalto Sketches* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, England: The MIT Press, 1985), pp 157–158.