

Author: Colin Ripley

Affiliations: Ryerson University, Department of Architectural Science;
European Graduate School.

Email: cripley@ryerson.ca

Stealing kisses: On the erotics of architecture

Abstract: Starting with three erotic scenes from the work of Jean Genet, this paper develops an analysis of the role of architecture within the erotic and investigates the (repressed) role of the erotic within architecture, and of architecture within the erotic. In this work, Genet acts as a thief – allowing us to work surreptitiously, to steal meaning, to uncover ways of understanding architecture that might otherwise remain hidden.

Keywords: Genet, architecture, wall, void.

The stairway... is cut into the stone of the wall and
unwinds in shadow. It was the lovers' trysting-place,
particularly ours, and it still vibrates with the sound of the
kisses exchanged there.

- Jean Genet, *Miracle of the Rose* (1988, 45)

We start with three scenes from the work of Jean Genet, three moments of intense erotic power. A prisoner meets the beautiful boy he desires in the shadow of the stair, and they exchange a furtive kiss. Two prisoners share smoke through a small hole in the wall that divides (and connects) their cells. A man remembers tasting his now-dead teenage boyfriend's anus, and fantasizes about crawling inside the rectum/tomb/void.

We're struck by the architectural character of all three scenes, two explicit (the stair and the wall), one more abstract: the void, abstract, yes, but maybe even more core to architecture.

All of these Genet-ic architectonics are set vibrating by the erotic events, to be sure, all three become erotic architectures. But what we have understood the situation backwards: what if the architectures, far from being inert piles of stones made to vibrate by the sound of kisses, are themselves agents, collaborators in and even instigators of the erotic? What if architecture is always-already an erotic act?

It is of course obvious that architecture always has a relation to the erotic. After all, sex always happens in relation to buildings: in bedrooms, on kitchen tables, in offices, in cheap motels. And even when sex happens out of doors, in the park or in the wilderness, the *frisson* is always the result precisely of that outside-ness. Quite aside from the physical location in which sex takes place, a location which I would suggest ties sex and architecture from the start (architecture takes on the smell, so to speak, of all that sex), our erotic scenes are inseparably tied up with places; it is this link that makes the classic brothel, the house of illusion, so powerful. As any watcher of pornography will tell you, our erotic desires are intimately bound up with architectural scenes: the boudoir, the dungeon, the locker room, the doctor's office, the prison – and on and on. All places of power, that is, all places touched by architecture, are settings for the erotic; architecture is never neutral, when it comes to the erotic, but always an actant in the erotic assemblage.

In the sketch that follows I look to develop an analysis of the relation between architecture and sex. Following loosely from the three scenes from Genet mentioned above, I will develop three positions on the role that architecture plays in sex and in the erotic.

One: If these walls could talk.

In Genet's novel *Miracle of the Rose*, an intensely erotic relationship plays out over the course of a series of brief scenes that takes place on the stairway in Fontevrault Prison, between Genet and the younger prisoner, Bulkaen. The stairway is one of the dominant spaces in the novel, its vertical shaft complementing the an(nul)us of the punishment cell and the void of the cell. The stairway is the location of encounter, of love.

We were still at the bend of the stairway, in the shadow.... I shall never sign sufficiently the pleated stairway, and its shadow. The fellows used to meet there. (Genet, 1988, 61)

Again on the stairway, and at the same turning, which had ended by being ours, he gave me a quick peck on the mouth and started to run off, but I had the time to grab him by the waist, bend back his head and, drunk with love, kiss him. It was the sixth day of our friendship. It's this kiss that I often recall at night. (Genet, 1988, 105)

The stairway is the location in which the seduction, the romance progresses, from the exchange of notes to the offering of bread, the exchange of clothing, and finally the kiss that makes the apparatus vibrate. The stair in this scenario could be seen to act as a setting, a background, an apparatus, a particular organization of spatialities and materials that allows the erotic act to take place and perhaps acts as a catalyst. With due reference to the diagrams of meaning and being located towards the end of Lacan's Seminar XI, we could develop a simple diagram of this scene, of the two participants on the stair (Figure 1; Lacan, 1981, 211). The interaction of the two lovers (I use that word guardedly here) is represented as an overlap of the boundaries of the two selves, which are in turn represented with solid and static boundary walls, although of course we understand that neither of those conditions apply; the boundary is better represented perhaps as a vibrating and fuzzy region of uncertainty. The overlap is thus a zone of transgression of the boundaries of the self, suggesting perhaps that this transgression is the

The stair (Architecture)

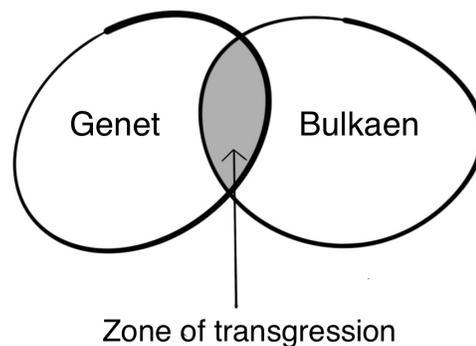


Figure 1

frisson that produces the erotic; in Lacan's terms, it is the gap that opens with the impossible search for the self in the other.

Architecture, in the body of the stair, sits outside or behind the action, as a third term, always present and watching, and representative of all other third terms that inhabit our erotic scenes; architecture in this sense is always our parents' house, and they are always listening in the next room. And the stair in Genet's scene knows what is going on, sees the exchange of kisses, is affected by the vibrations of the scene.

Of course, the scenario is more complicated than this. First of all, as the diagram suggests, architecture is not separate from the being of the other, but in some way always present in or under the other. Bulkaen is never simply Beautiful Boy, but always and already Beautiful-Boy-on-the-stair; architecture is never not present in our objects of desire. Second, of course, that present object of desire is not really the object of desire, not the object of ultimate desire: as Genet makes clear, Bulkaen is not just Bulkaen, but also somehow all his lovers from his childhood at Mettray, including the murderer Harcamone. This simple diagram is therefore a representation of a much more complex and slippery situation, manifesting infinite ghosts, infinite reflections, infinite representations of representations in all of which architecture is implicated.

Not-two: The wall between us

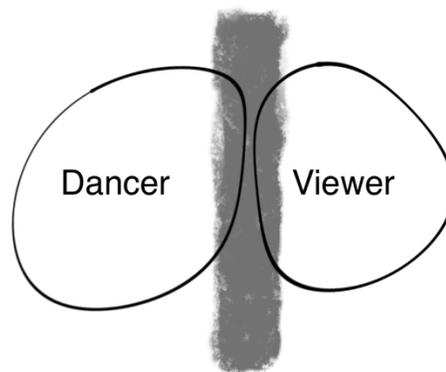
Architecture plays a fundamental, perhaps even a leading role in Jean Genet's 1950 film, *Un chant d'amour* (Genet et al., 1950). The film's plot is simple. Two prisoners are in solitary confinement, separated by a masonry wall. One, a young, handsome *mec*, played by Genet's real-life lover (for whom he built St-Genet, his house in Le Cannet – but that is a very different story) Lucien Sénémaud, dances, alone in his cell. The other prisoner, an older, burly man, watches him dance through a hole, the size of a pencil, that they have surreptitiously (we suppose) bored in the stone; in a climax, the two prisoners share smoke through a straw inserted in the hole, exchanging (extra-) bodily fluids, kissing through the wall (and more: the scene is clearly evocative of a "glory hole" scene). The prisoners are watched by a guard who

spies on them. The guard confronts the older prisoner, and violence ensues, violence that is transformed on all sides into erotic fantasy. My interest in this film is primarily on the role of the wall, this stone line which both separates the prisoners and brings them together; the wall which is penetrated by a penis-straw; the wall that, in the moment of the erotic climax, becomes nothing more substantial than smoke.

The wall in this scene moves beyond the passive backgrounding of the stair in our first scenario (although it could be argued in retrospect that the passivity of the stair was itself overstated). The wall moves from the role of apparatus to that of active participant in the erotic scene, a third body in the love-making. The older prisoner embraces the wall, rubbing his body against the body of architecture; both prisoners touch and kiss the wall. The erotic scene becomes – perhaps is always – a three-way scene.

In our simplistic diagram, architecture moves from a background position into the centre of the argument, separating and connecting the two prisoners (Figure 2). The wall constitutes now the zone of overlap for the two, the possibility of connection; architecture here has a fetish role, facilitating and making possible an erotic connection, focusing and anchoring the vibrations of the erotic self. For each of the two human participants in the scene, the wall is split: it is at once the wall of the cell they are in, and the outer surface of the body of the lover in the opposite cell. Architecture takes on a fundamentally conflicted multiple role, both

The guard (Other)



The wall (architecture)

Figure 2

(partial) object of desire in itself, an erotic body-without-organs, a non-human desiring-machine, and a very human erotic exo-dermis. This is only to diagram the fundamental being of architecture as both representative (and constructive) of the illusion of the self and the equal illusion of architecture as outside the self, as object. In this sense architecture is perhaps the most typical example of Latour's category of the quasi-object.

As I have mentioned above, in addition to the three primary participants in this erotic dance, there is fourth term, the guard. The guard in this diagram takes a position similar to the stair in the first scene, outside the action itself, but somehow fundamental and necessary. The guard, in spying on the scene, sets up a series of optical displacements: the younger prisoner is viewed by the older, the older is viewed by the guard, the guard is viewed by the camera, the film is viewed by us, we are viewed by....? And everyone in the scene, of course, misunderstands, mis-sees the action. The prisoners think this is their erotic scene, the guard thinks it is his, we think it is ours. Architecture, in every case, frames and produces these misapprehensions.

Not-One: The void of the self

The veneration I feel for that part of the body and the great tenderness that I have bestowed on the children who have allowed me to enter it, the grace and sweetness of their gift, oblige me to speak of all this with respect. It is not profaning the most beloved of the dead to speak, in the guise of a poem whose tone is still unknowable, of the happiness he offered me when my face was buried in a fleece that was damp with my sweat and saliva and that stuck together in little locks of hair which dried after lovemaking and remained stiff.

- Jean Genet, *Funeral Rites* (1963, 21)

The third sketch of the relationship between architecture and the erotic is a bit more abstract than the first two. It has to do not so much with the role of architecture as an actant in the erotic assemblage, but rather more to do with the erotic as an architectural process, about the construction of architecture through the erotic and therefore about the architectural core of all erotic scenes (and for that matter, of the self in general). The sketch starts with Genet's novel *Funeral Rites*, which is on the face of things an act of mourning for Genet's teenage lover Jean Decarnin, killed by German forces while participating as a member of the resistance during the Liberation of Paris in 1944. The novel is a fascinating, swirling mass of mirroring and displacements, of brothers and executioners, of militiamen and Hitler, and at the centre of this swirling mass of reflections is nothing less than Decarnin's anus, the black hole whose gravitational force sets everything else into motion. Beyond the doorway of the anus (in the novel, discussion of the *oeil de Gabès* always precedes entry into a building, either the church where the funeral is being held, or the mother's apartment) there is only the unknowable void: the rectum, the tomb, death.

On the day of his funeral, the church door opened at four in the afternoon on a black hole into which I made my way solemnly... "It's as dark up here as up a nigger's asshole." It was that dark there, and I entered the place with the same slow solemnity. At the far end twinkled the tobacco-colored iris of the "*oeil de Gabès*." And, in the middle of it, haloed, savage, silent, awfully pale, was that buggered tank-driver... (Genet, 1963, 24).

The erotic here is revealed as the drive to the void, the death drive, the unending quest for the void inside ourselves in the body of the other. The erotic in this novel is a constant spiraling orbit towards nothingness, not about or oriented to physical death, but towards the nothingness that is at our core.

This situation suggests some modifications to our diagram (Figure 3). We might start the diagram with Genet (G) and Decarnin (D), which I will draw now not as regions or bounded areas but simply as points. There is an arrow that moves from G towards D, expressing perhaps the movement of Genet's tongue, or G's desire. But the arrow always misses D, as D is not available to G: we might say, for example, that Decarnin becomes pure asshole, or is supplemented by the executioner, or what have you: but what the arrow reaches is not-D, which we might label D₁. Of course by this token the arrow initiated not from G but from G₁:

from some version of Genet, from Genet's tongue. There will be a reciprocal arrow from D_1 back towards G , which again misses its mark, hitting perhaps G_2 – we could think of this arrow

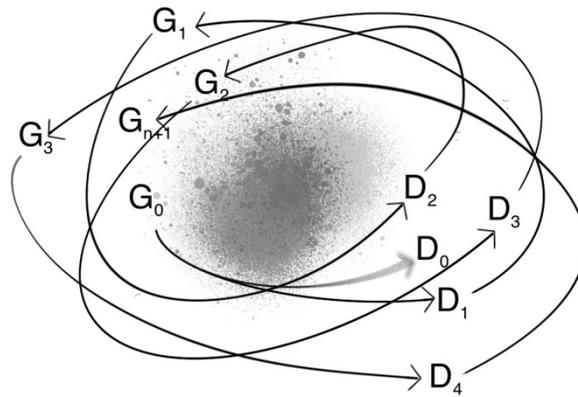


Figure 3

as Genet's search for the void in himself in the void of the other, or as Decarnin's reciprocal drive towards the void of the other *as imputed by Genet*. The process continues: $G_2 \rightarrow D_3 \rightarrow G_3 \rightarrow \dots \rightarrow G_{n+1}$. In the end we have a diagram, still absurdly simplified, that suggests the self as not interior – that interior is indeed the unknowable void that can never, by definition, be accessed – but just the boundary, the edge, the wall, and a boundary that is multiple, fissured, unlocatable and constantly vibrating. If we overlay on this a second diagram drawn from the point of view of Decarnin, a diagram we are never presented in the text (this is important to bear in mind), we recuperate a diagram similar to our starting point – but with some significant differences and implications.

First, we have to recognize that the notion of the self in the two diagrams is radically changed. In our initial diagram we represented the self as a region bounded by a stable and identifiable boundary, a wall, that radically separated inside and outside. The latest version of the diagram presents the self instead, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, as just the boundary, just the wall, but a wall that is multiple, fractured and constantly shifting. Practically speaking, there is no interior in this situation – or rather, we might say that interiority is just an illusory architectural effect of the fractured boundary. In simple terms, this analysis requires the abandonment of the notion of the self as a contained, bounded and stable entity,

abandonment of the “I” of the *cogito*. Perhaps this is what Freud had in mind when he talked about the erotic as a fracturing of the self. At the same time, though, we need to recognize a second mechanism at play: the self is constructed in this analysis through the erotic, through the play of mi-representations and displacements resulting from desire. While our first diagram posits the self as a pre-existing entity inserted into or encompassed by an erotic scene, the last demonstrates precisely the opposite: that the self emerges precisely as an artefact of the erotic. This self, constructed through the erotic, is never pre-existing, but always in motion, in becoming, and never really even an entity, being composed of pure movement of ideas.

Finally, how can we understand the role of architecture, seemingly absent, in this final diagram? We could say, first of all, that this diagram is inherently architectural: it is the construction of a wall around a void. As Lacan put it in a late lecture,

It is too frequently omitted that, regardless of the efforts architects make to leave them behind, the said architects exist for that, for building walls. And walls, my word ... are made to envelop a void. (Lacan, 2017, 81)

The diagram is thus representative of what I would call the architecturalization of the self, by which I mean two things: first, the construction of the self, of an apparent boundary wall and interior, through a process formed of a series of contingencies; and second, the re-presentation of that contingent construction as a more or less stable entity, a real pre-existing interior and an inviolable, we might say impenetrable, boundary wall. Architecture is no longer a participant in the erotic scene, but rather, is the process that underlies the mechanism that binds the erotic to the production of the self.

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