



Damenzimmer of the Müller House, by Adolph Loos
(photo credit Anne Troutman)

SPACE- ESPACE- ESCAPE: AN INTERVIEW WITH ANNE TROUTMAN

Christie Pearson on behalf of Scapegoat Journal
What started you on your journey into erotic space?

Anne Troutman I taught a design studio at SCI-Arc for many years and at a certain point became critical of the formal strategies being used, so I began focusing my design studios on direct experience, assigning my students to build (and perform) in actual scale, in real time. Site-specific installation work wasn't common at the time—we were cutting into walls at the school, appending structures to the building—barely avoiding being shut down by the fire marshal! A couple of these studios I called Intimate Space—the idea was to explore how each individual might materially and spatially express her or his relationship to the world—to architecturally evoke how individuals navigate the space between self-within and world-at-large. As an architect teaching studio and not a theoretician, I was operating mostly intuitively. Later, to deepen my understanding of the historical underpinnings of my intuitions regarding how personal, intimate, and relational space is constructed, I decided go to UCLA for a Masters in architectural history and cultural theory. I was aware of Carlo Mollino's

erotic interiors—there was only one book on him then—and initially I thought I would research his career. I was working with Tony Vidler at that time, and he suggested I look deeper into the history of eroticism and space. After a year of research, I chose to focus on the eighteenth-century French boudoir, a unique and unexamined spatial type. The story of the boudoir—a space that came into existence specifically for female retreat in the aristocratic *hôtel*—led me back into the realm of relational space.

SG When you say “relational space” what do you mean?

AT I wanted to understand the architectural and spatial dynamics of intimate experience—of “felt space” in which structure, surface, and the play of light work together to create an experience of intimacy and connectedness. But the phenomenal is extremely difficult to put into words. Gaston Bachelard did a masterful literary job in *The Poetics of Space*. However, I found that apart from Le Corbusier's exuberant writings (on *l'espace indicible* and so on), architectural history rarely captured in a satisfying way how the haptic and the visual work together architecturally and spatially to produce intimate experience. Since my chosen subject was the erotic space of the boudoir, I decided to try to come up with a vocabulary to describe how this space type worked. I did a spatial and architectural analysis of the boudoir but soon realized the underlying experience I was trying to describe—the erotic—like space itself was not easily put into words. Eros always exceeds Logos. The erotic experience of the boudoir certainly exceeded the methods by which its effect was created. Slowly my investigation into the construction of erotic space began to morph beyond the boudoir into a theory of spatial dynamics—or what I came to think of as spatial erotics—so I coined the phrase “erotics of space.” The boudoir as a space type kept unfolding...

SG How did the boudoir start?

AT The boudoir was initially a transitional space, a hesitation between rooms—not a hallway (those didn't yet exist)—but a tiny area

with perhaps a cushioned seat, little more than a threshold which allowed momentary escape from the incessant visibility of daily life. In the aristocratic eighteenth-century *hôtel*, all the rooms were public and organized enfilade: one opening onto another. The concept of individual privacy had barely come into being. Hallways only appeared in the nineteenth-century bourgeois house. As the notion of privacy came to assert itself, a suite of smaller rooms developed alongside and parallel to the public rooms. These were usually entered by a door within a wall panel. Among those rooms there was a small sleeping area, a dressing room, toilet or bath area, and the boudoir. The boudoir was usually located between the sleeping and dressing areas—a connective space. The word boudoir likely came from the French *bouder*, meaning “to pout,” the idea being that it was a space in which to feel—to pout, to withdraw. It was a specifically female space. Men had studies, but before the boudoir women didn’t have a space for withdrawal, reading, or private conversation. In her boudoir, the lady of the house enjoyed informal time and intimate conversation, an escape from the formal, visible, official program of the day. Over time the boudoir morphed along with shifts in gender and politics. During the French Revolution it became associated with the illicit—the space of rendezvous, sexual encounter, and deal making—a place of feminine power. Where it survived in the nineteenth century, it changed again with the rise of the middle class and the separation of the domestic function of the bourgeois household, into more of a fantasy space. This was a more repressive era. The couch, a view (garden or paintings), and decorative furnishings and fabrics remained, but in place of the sexual rendezvous was the fantasy space of the written novel. Some of the furnishings and decorations were inspired by colonial exploits, mostly “oriental” in motif. So the boudoir had a history: from a place to withdraw, to seat of power, intimacy and secrecy, and finally to the realm of fantasy.

That’s the social and programmatic part.

There is also the way the aesthetics of the space itself worked. It had to do with creating liminality. How did they create liminal space? Flickering candlelight, the play of reflections on the mirrored walls, yards and yards of soft voluptuous fabric, minimal furnishings, nature itself or scenes from nature: all blended into an atmosphere of intimacy and anticipation. The boudoir had this kind of oneiric or dream-like quality from the beginning.

Details aside, this feminine space was in essence a visually integrated, spatially dynamic, and flexible space—a vocabulary that is particularly interesting in light of the features of high modernist architecture. Loos’s Müller House of 1929, which actually had a boudoir, is a wonderful example. Directly over the front door with views to both inside and outside entrances, the *Damenzimmer* was hidden in plain sight, poised between inside and out, where its occupant could observe while unobserved—giving it a voyeuristic dimension. Loos’s *Raumplan*, which is condensed in the *Damenzimmer*, is an integrated spatial system. Loos was a bridge figure between the Victorian and modern eras. His very early interiors borrow from eighteenth-century boudoirs, are covered with fabrics and furs, and were later to be transformed, hardened, and flattened into continuous surfaces, highlighting the spatial dynamics of the *Raumplan*. A close study of the work of Le Corbusier, Mies, Charreau, Loos, and Mollino allowed me to begin to develop a theory of modernist spatial erotics—too much for this conversation but detailed in my essays and book.

SG You see it in Mies’s collage drawings, this incredible ambition to bring together an extremely sensual palette with enigmatic, abstracted forms, and that in itself is so delightful. It’s almost like those collages present a big question mark to the viewer: how are we going to reconcile these ambitions?

AT The sensual and the abstract are not mutually exclusive. Like the carnal and the spiritual, they are two sides of the same coin. Mies made space itself palpable in the same way you’re describing his collages. In his

buildings the proportion and surface material of a column make you feel the weight the column supports. Mies created an integrated, deeply aesthetic, and dynamic spatiality you can’t really pull apart.

SG When you were talking before about a language you could use around spatial erotics, you mentioned a few key points: program, dynamics, tactility, and integration.

AT Yes. The historic boudoir was programmatically flexible, visually dynamic, spatially integrated, tactile and haptic. In the twentieth century this space type was generalized over the entire house, and overt tactility was replaced by visual texture and spatial integration; the boudoir effectively transformed into an erotics of space.

SG So what does the “erotics of space” mean to you right now?

AT We are in an era now when categories that were being questioned in the last couple of decades are being destroyed, or perhaps just losing relevance. I think the historical boudoir has significance in this regard, in that it broke out of historical strictures and gave place to new social phenomena. Today, maybe an “incubator space” is an example. Incubators are spatially and programmatically indeterminate, flexible spaces—not only as a marketplace of sorts (food for venture capitalists) but as places of rendezvous in which different disciplines are invited to cross-fertilize! A corporate boudoir?

SG When you say incubator space, what exactly interests you?

AT There are a lot in LA. They are spaces of creativity designed to encourage the cross-fertilization of ideas. Incubators are, to borrow a term from Winnicott, pure “potential space.” They are usually repurposed warehouses on the outskirts of cities—transitional areas—and thus enjoy a certain freedom from definition and convention, at least compared with a corporate headquarters on Wall Street.

SG Within a capitalist framework... I believe that MIT has a history similar to this by intentionally mixing people up from different departments in order to generate new ideas. Also, I think about

Cedric Price’s Fun House, which was supposed to be program-free and dynamic, although it has a machine-like quality. It was only supposed to have the program or activities that people created for themselves.

AT Great examples...

SG I wonder about the role of the public when you say the boudoir emerged from a building where every space was public. You may know that people would receive visitors in the toilet or while in the bathtub, that these were not hidden spaces. There was a degree of “publicness” in everything that you did. How do spatial erotics relate to the cultivation of private life? There’s the public and the private, and you need some sort of relationship between them to activate it. The *Damenzimmer* is not a windowless pod: it’s a place that oversees other rooms where you have visual and acoustic relationships to others.

AT Spatial erotics has to do with relational space, as opposed to rooms, functions, and types. The dynamic and immersive boudoir created the illusion of unbounded space, a sense of release from reductive and defining roles of daily life. It was an erotic space, but it also suggests an overall erotics of space... space—espace—escape... Maybe we could think of the eighteenth-century boudoir as a sort of trans-space? When we give up categorizing, we gain a sense of freedom and newfound clarity about what really matters.

SG The boudoir was a space of freedom for a particular group of aristocratic women that had certain rules and modes of operation and roles to play. In every culture and every group you are going to have those rules and potential for a break. It would be interesting to study how to grow the space of freedom within a group while still holding the group together. I wonder if things are going to get more erotic. Is a more erotic time on the horizon?

AT People don’t really understand what can be meant by erotic. Generally it’s associated with the sexual, but it’s much more than that. The erotic is a combination of the spiritual and the physical—both/and, never one thing or another. Are we entering a more erotic time? A resounding YES. Globalization has forced us to

change. Think back to the myth of Psyche and Eros—the relationship of human and divine. When Eros came to Psyche in the dark of night they fell in love, but it turns out that love can only exist in the dark. But when she becomes curious to see her mysterious lover, and holds up the lamp to see him, their relationship is destroyed. We don't need to see everything defined in bright light. We need to experience love and not analyze all the time. This is what makes this subject extremely difficult to talk about. I wonder how this relates to the iPhone and virtual reality, this amazing opportunity to live in transitional, relational, virtual space all the time.

SG And the role played by fantasy as well... VR is full of fantasy. There is some kind of tension that needs to be held in the separation between that fantasy realm and your daily life.

AT Your body!

SG There's a tension between the mind and body in this culture...

AT ... and they're always in relation.

SG In terms of the production of sexual identity, there's something there in the construction of eros and the articulation of distinct groups who are going to symbolically hold these different qualities and maintain separateness and tension within the society. Other freedoms, the freedom to create other kinds of tensions and relationships and the realm of play that opens up when you pause that script is very exciting. There are other kinds of tension and articulation. To present yourself in an ambiguous way creates a tension in the mind of the beholder who is trying to figure out your identity, your mystery. This relates to Mary Douglas's definition of the sacred/profane as being neither/nor.

AT You just described two sides of one coin.

SG And absolute freedom?

AT That's the informe. If you take it architecturally you end up with the informe, Bataille, and the Surrealists. You end up on the other side.

SG What is the architecture of the informe?

AT Well, in physical architectural terms, blur buildings would be an aspect of the informe. Bataille is interesting: he was a rule-destroyer.

Wouldn't he utterly reject architecture? He would create violence, take that tension and make violence out of it perhaps. I don't think that he could tolerate any kind of real form-making. Do you? I'm not sure. His purpose was to undo. I explored the topic of the informe in my essay *Blur Buildings and Space That Obliterates*.

SG He also talks about bringing things to the edge. Without some kind of edge that separates us from the abyss, there is no speculation about the abyss. We are simply reabsorbed into the totality of matter through death.

AT Maybe his edge is like the edge of a knife. What happens when we are confronted with the edge of a knife? We are thrust back into our survival instincts, and that would be precisely what he would want. He involutes the symbolic. He is a master of the id.

SG My best guess is that it would be more of a ritual, like an architecture-supported ritual of bringing people to the knife's edge and an apprehension of the abyss. You don't have access to that at every moment. Maybe it would be a project for reminding people or bringing people close to that in an event that had the power to shock.

AT That's where installation and performance is more effective, perhaps, than architecture could ever be in doing what you described. Think about Marina Abramović's well-known performance where you have to squeeze between two naked people to get to the next room, inside a museum with white walls where everything is objectified. To place two human bodies in a narrow doorway and then ask the viewer to walk between them, unavoidably touching them, to get into the next room. That was a performance of the boudoir: threshold, the body, touch... you have to press through.

SG That example conjures a huge amount of tension, and orgiastic potential energy.

AT That's what makes it erotic.

SG How could the tools that you've discovered in the formation of spatial erotics be used for revolutionary purposes? I'm thinking of the Tumblr site *luxurycommunism*.

AT I love that. It's really great. The opening

today is "why does everybody have to work?" Work doesn't make sense. There is not enough to do.

SG I wonder what the people of Greece and Germany would say about that right now...

AT What exactly are they proposing in *luxurycommunism*?

SG It's connected to the Plan C people in England. I think they are saying could we have a communist-inflected revision of society based on egalitarian sharing, but also based on the distribution of pleasure, beauty and wealth, rather than work. It's opposed to capitalist hierarchy and the concentration of wealth in the hands of the few, but also in opposition to an egalitarian minimalism where everyone has to suffer equally due to limited resources, or a scarcity model of economics. Delicious everything for everybody, or whatever you want.

AT Well, some people's luxuries are other people's poverty. I just read an article about the removal of the nomads from the remote lands of western China. China has embarked on a campaign to essentially incarcerate them. They've paid these people a nominal sum to live in concrete bunkers they call towns, and the people, robbed of their so-called "primitive" way of life, have nothing but a few bucks, a TV, an electric stove, and a couch. Is this *luxurycommunism*? It's a nightmare. Some of these people are killing themselves, starving. Yet China is claiming they are better off in these "improved" shelters. Nature and freedom is the ultimate luxury for many of these people... not a stove and a TV. Breathing clean air, drinking clean water, and seeing the sunrise and the moonrise—there is perhaps no greater luxury than that freedom of movement. Luxury is not a cellphone-for-everyone...

SG Freedom of movement is a luxury right now. Maybe in the future after that revolution, nobody has a passport either. We could move freely. You'd have to undo a lot of things. Today we see the destruction of nomadic life in China and we all want to cry, while only a few generations ago in North America this happened at a tremendous scale. We can't undo that.

AT This is luxury: freedom of movement and

flexible boundaries. I don't know how that fits in with the corporate culture that America has adopted now. Meanwhile, we have the very local issue of guiding our children back to their bodies, which are being harnessed by corporate culture. Pretty soon we're going to be a little chip. We are terrified of losing our bodies, our human nature.