SexSpace: Creating Architectural Rituals for Getting Laid
(a women’s sex club in Provincetown, Massachusetts)

by
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Submitted to the Department of Architecture in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, February 1998

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THANKS, YOU TWO. PUFF! THAT WAS A REAL MENSTRUAL HUT KIND OF EXPERIENCE. WOMEN ARE SO WONDERFUL! CAN YOU IMAGINE IF WE RAN THE WORLD?! NO MORE NEUTRON BOMBS OR RACISM OR FEMININE HYGIENE SPRAY!

EXACTLY! WHAT'S SO INCREDIBLE ABOUT THIS ACTION IS THAT IT SHOWS HOW, LIKE, NUCLEAR WEAPONS AND PORNOGRAPHY AND THE LACK OF AFFORDABLE DAYCARE ARE ALL CONNECTED!

HEY, SPEAKING OF WHICH, I'M MISSING THE ANTI-PORNOGRAPHY NETWORKING. I GOTA GO.

Dykes to Watch Out For © 1981
Alison Bechdel
catalogue 1995
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Abstract

Much recent debate has centered around architecture, the gendering of space, and space and sexuality. Many fine books are now delving deep into feminist psychoanalysis, post-structuralist theory, and postmodern debate to explain how these issues intersect, discussing past projects from a new historical perspective, and theorizing our pleasure and our oppression. Questions are asked which pertain not only to how space has been used to define the person, or the group, but to challenge the very ideas of self-representation, identity, and desire.

This project is one attempt to imagine what a sex club for women might be like: it must consider the lack of public urban space for women, define a single sex space, ponder questions of the theory of lesbian desire, and use its architecture as a powerful means to define the body and a community. It draws heavily on the precedents of gay men’s sex spaces, in particular bathhouses, with their own highly codified behaviors, and a multicultural history rich in symbolism and ritual.

This building will be successful, if you can see it and imagine only women using it.

Thesis Advisor: Mark Jarzombek, Associate Professor of Architecture
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and to
Blue, my best friend
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“Even women who did acknowledge publically the sexual component of their love for other women often defined themselves by other terms, as Jeanne Flash Gray did, recalling her life in Harlem in the 1930s and 40s, ‘when we were Bull Daggers and Faggots and only whites were lesbians and homosexuals . . . ‘”

Andrea Weiss
Vampires and Violets p 3

from documentary on black lesbian history: Tiny & Ruby:
 Hell Drivin’ Women
Andrea Weiss Vampires and Violets p 147
It is important to be clear about language so that hopefully we all end up using the same one (not everyone’s goal, I know). I try to write in non-sexist (-classist, "-racist") terms. If I have, then I probably meant to for a point. Also, there are many distinctions made in the gay male and lesbian communities which have meanings that might escape the uninitiated reader. Some might notice I used “lesbian” and not “gay woman.” The former is often the shortened version of what was once lesbian feminist and denotes a woman who is more politically active or aware than a woman who might call herself “gay.” Today, younger lesbians also prefer the word gay, perhaps because they’ve grown up more involved with gay men than many of us did 20 years ago. Terms that once had been hurled as insults by those positioning themselves against the gay and lesbian communities (and I am careful not to say heterosexuals here, since gay men and lesbians have been known to use a few words of self-hatred themselves) have been reclaimed, their meanings now identified as positive attributes. Once, being called a fairy or a bulldyke was a form of harassment; today, many people prefer to identify themselves with these words. (My favorite sign at the Pride March: “That’s Mrs. Bulldyke to you!”)

In recent years, the word “queer” has been reclaimed, and has become a positive word to denote difference of all kinds, marginalization from mainstream culture, Otherness. One can be queer and not even be gay or lesbian. One can be queer and happy to be different.

I occasionally use the word straight, as opposed to heterosexual, and do so purposefully. First, because I would rather not use the word homosexuality, which some might conclude is the
"In broad terms, gays seek rights, tolerance, and acceptance into the fold; queers by contrast, tend to actively resist oppressive agencies of social authorities."

Henry Urbach
"Spatial Rubbing"
SITES 25 p. 93
opposite, and also because I write in a certain position and have no plans to hide that fact.

It should also be noted that my project is a sex club for women and not specifically for lesbians, though it is safe to say that most of the clients will be lesbians, and it is certainly designed with lesbians in mind. But it is better to avoid the labeling game by simply inviting all women since there are women who don't call themselves “lesbian,” “gay,” or “queer” who have sex with women (and then of course, will this include transsexuals?, a whole other debate). Also, having sex is not a prerequisite to being in this club, so it's possible women defining themselves as straight would enjoy being in a place absent of men, or go to participate as voyeurs only, as might lesbians.
CAUCASIAN TRANSLATION

Translation: My parents hired a West Indian woman to raise the kids.

Translation: 3 African-Americans, 2 Latinas, and 52.7 white people.

Translation: I'm not prejudiced—hell, I grew up with blacks!

Translation: Oh, of course you'll be comfortable! It's a very mixed bar!

Translation: I'm not racist—in fact, I'm very attracted to black men...

Translation: All my friends are white, all the men I fuck are black.

Translation: Why does everybody have to label themselves 'African-American' or 'Chinese-American' or 'Mexican-American'—can't we all just be people?

Translation: Can't we all just be white?
"Areas and populations which represent failures of or challenges to aspects of the dominant order (e.g., slums; gentrified areas) tend to be coded in both dominant and alternative cultures as erotic (i.e., both dangerous and potentially liberatory)."

Lawrence Knopp “Sexuality and Urban Space”
David Bell Mapping Desire p 152
Public space for public sex has been around, one can assume, about as long as humanity. Different communities have glorified and ritualized, rejected and marginalized this type of behavior, dependent upon location, players, and various other factors (i.e., economic status, intent, age, position within a culture). People chuckle at the idea of kids in the backseat of Dad’s Chevy, but recoil at the Combat Zone. Prostitution, a close relative of public sex, was and is often plied in very public settings, whether it is the picture windows of Amsterdam, or the fancy ladies hanging out on the porch of every Western movie’s brothel. The gay men’s community, in particular, has an entire not-so-underground culture revolving around bathhouses, bars, gyms, jack-off clubs, and outdoor spaces, from truck stops to bus stations, that have provided a variety of venues for different types of sexual encounters. Some have been safer than others, some more exciting.

Only in the past 25 years have lesbians begun to consider anonymous sex (as debate at the national level, at first through mainly print media and local organizations, and soon in notorious conferences, film, video, and public figures), and only very recently have they begun to make specific public and semi-public spaces in which to do it. There are many reasons for both the failures and successes behind these places, including the general lack of awareness or interest in women’s sexual pleasure until recently (by both men and women), a lack of access to public space for women in general, lack of financial and political resources necessary to sustain businesses geared toward the women’s community, and the invisibility of a lesbian culture with clear sexual codes.
"Why is having lunch so much different than having sex? Eating and fucking are both body functions. They can both be done in public. Sometimes they both have a price on them. They're both satisfying and gratifying, they both feed the soul, but suddenly, because of our conditioning, one has this sociable aspect to it and the other is hidden in the corner."

Kendall Thomas “Going Public”
Dangerous Bedfellows
Policing Public Sex p 57
At the same time, architecture theorists have begun a closer examination of the ways in which gender, sexuality, and culture have manifested themselves in the space we occupy, from the gendered public city of men and the private domestic sphere of women, to a radical examination of Semper's theory on weaving and its relationship to women's pubic hair. Architecture not only becomes an expression of who we are, but can be an oppressing force as well - women, "racial" minorities, queers, Others, can all find ways in which architecture benefits ideas of hegemony by defining our lives and communities without our permission. Jane Rendell writes: "... 'separate spheres' - the ideology which divides men from women, culture from nature, production from reproduction, city from home, public from private... is both oppositional and hierarchical - a dominant male realm of production (city) and subordinate, private, female one of reproduction (the home). The separate spheres is the most pervasive spatial configuration of sexual and social relations. Yet as an ideological device, it does not always describe the full lived experience of urban dwellers." This thinking is what makes the idea of sex outside the home so untenable to so many after all: the very ideas behind public and private [space] and who owns each. This issue has also created a schism within gay and lesbian politics over strategies for change, especially over whether to couch arguments within the realm of civil rights, issues of privacy, and legal challenges, while sacrificing our liberation in the greater public domain (and apologizing for the right to public sex). The idea of relegating lesbian and gay sex to the privacy of one's home is to give in to the idea that we are just like everyone else. It denies us a public presence. It denies us our sexual expression.
“Clit Club owner Julie Tolentino said “I’ve spent months agonizing over how to get girls to fuck in a more anonymous way . . . Women are just starting to get used to the idea of how to ask someone to dance. . . .”

Roxxie “Sister Act”
The Advocate Jan 1993
Film theory has been invaluable in terms of theories of identity and position, spectatorship and desire; issues which figure largely in this project. It is a question of what is lesbian desire, is it different from [straight] women's desire, how is it presented, does this reinforce a single reading of Lesbian? Isn't this creating a monolithic, essentialist reading of Woman/Lesbian? or in fact is there a representation of lesbian, a universal coding even, that allows us to have this very discussion. Is this a reason to design a building specifically for women/lesbians, and to wonder just what that might mean? Ie, is there really an architecture particular to women and/or lesbians? Does it dichotomize women and men, straights and lesbians? Can plurality still exist? Unfortunately, to even have this discussion, we must agree on a definition of woman and lesbian, and let acculturation take its course. Not all questions are answered here, but certainly must be raised.

images
p 20 top from the movie Pandora's Box 1928
Andrea Weiss Vampires and Violets p 23
bottom from the movie Yentl
Chris Straayer Devient Eyes Devient Bodies p 58
p 21 Lillian Faderman Surpassing the Love of Men p 262
My best friend Fred, a gay man, would come back to our college from his weekends in New York City and tell me in great detail of his sexual encounters and exploits. In our number-of-sexual-partners competitions, his lists of lovers' names always ended with "don't know/remember" and a huge number followed by a plus sign. I was always interested in these stories, so foreign were they from my own sexual experiences confined within more traditional relationships (and a shorter list of names well remembered). His community had a long history of anonymous public sex, with its own codes and rituals, evolving to meet the challenges of the politics of liberation, AIDS, and even conservative apologists from within their own group. Sex for Fred was always a wonderful adventure, to be enjoyed with friends, lovers, and strangers; something easy to come by if you knew where to look.

The history of gay men's sex spaces reveals valuable lessons in what these places represented to their patrons and the outside world, how they were (or weren't) designed, and what made for good sex. Also at hand should be an attempt to define what, if anything, about these spaces might be particular to only men, and then also, only to gay men, and how their position as a minority within a dominating majority might affect their spaces.

In an excellent history of bathhouses and gay and lesbian bars in America, Allan Bérubé describes the earliest meeting places gay men congregated for sex, and eventually, social spaces which began to be identified with a sense of community. Late in the 1800's and into the early 1900's, sex between men was illegal, no matter where it took place (and still is in 24 of the...
YMCA Locker Room 1933 painting by Paul Cadmus
Radical America vol 21 #2-3
United States). Unsafe in even their own homes, gay men visited “public parks at night; certain streets and alleys; empty boxcars in train yards; remote areas of beaches; YMCA rooms, steam rooms, and shower stalls; public restrooms in department stores, train stations, bus depots, parks, subway stations, and public libraries; balconies of silent movie theaters; cheap motel rooms; parked automobiles; and bathhouses. These locations were attractive because they offered the protection of anonymity, a degree of privacy, and the possibility of meeting men interested in having sex. They were dangerous because men who went there could be arrested, blackmailed, beaten, robbed, or killed.”

Today, while some gay men still seek the excitement of the docks or parks, other safer places have evolved which offer the opportunity for sexual encounters. (In a Disneyesque turn, some bars have even recreated dangerous sites - a truck stop becoming a semi-trailer within the safe haven of a sex club - a form of sexual simulacra.) Each of these places have their own atmosphere, rules, and design concerns. Backrooms of bars, private clubs, sex clubs, bathhouses and several hybrids of these, all offer different experiences, dependent upon their type, location, interior layout, lighting, and programmatic concerns, and the attendant behavior of their users.

Bar design itself has undergone at least one notable change in the last few years in its presentation to the street. If not down a back alley, entrances had been blank uninformative walls with one solitary door, sometimes entirely unmarked by a name. The gay press took note of a change in one predomi-
"Places devoted to sex are usually depicted [by the straight media] as harsh, alienated, scary environments, where people have only the most utilitarian and exploitative relationships. The Catacombs could not have been more different. . . . It was a sexually organized environment where people treated each other with mutual respect, and where they were lovingly sexual without being in holy wedlock."

Gayle Rubin "The Catacombs: A temple of the butthole"
Mark Thompson Leatherfolk p 139

nately gay section of London, in the early '90's, commenting on these "new bars . . . which are light, open spaces with huge plate glass windows (Tranter 1994) . . . gay men are not hidden behind closed doors. Straight passers-by can look in and observe gay men . . . we are highly visible." One explanation offered was that the current generation was more 'out' and more comfortable with this type of visibility.

Backrooms associated with bars mean the presence of alcohol, and due to public health regulations, also mean sex is illegal there. Therefore, some standard safe sex products, such as condoms and lube, are not available unless a customer brings his own. Generally situated at the back of the bar, the patron moves through other rooms and passageways before finding his way into a dim room filled with other men. These intermediary spaces heighten anticipation and function as more than just a route to an end. The darkness of the backroom is an important factor in moving the action away from image, and commodity. "Without surfaces or screens to project, or display visual representations, jack-off rooms do not function as spaces of spectacle, subjection of subjugation. Free of decoration and ornamentation, and furnishings, they do not operate through mediating devices. Rather they open up paths of immediate access and connection, joining desiring bodies with desiring bodies." 10

A private club might refer to the after-hours parties held at a bar, but is often an ongoing event in someone's private home. The Catacombs began in 1975 in the basement of a Victorian house in San Francisco to cater specifically to the gay men's
S/M and fisting community. Built by the house’s visionary owner, it was by invitation only, and open at first only on Saturday nights. Later, as women were admitted, other nights were added to accommodate different mixes of genders and sexualities. Invitees “had to know how to behave at a sex party or show some ability and willingness to learn appropriate etiquette.” 11 The design, geared toward particular types of sex, was a good example of the thoughtfulness that created this successful place. There was an anteroom which provided security, privacy, and shielded the 60 to 80 naked men inside from the cold. The main room included a bar where one paid and checked in with the owner. No alcohol was served, but refreshments were available from the club. “Out front was distinguished from ‘the back.’ In the front room, people socialized, smoked, drank, flirted, negotiated, and came up for air. Although there was sometimes sex play in the front, it was uncommon and generally more lighthearted than sex in the back. When two or more people had made a connection and were ready for serious play, they headed for the back. There was no smoking, eating, or drinking permitted in the back rooms. The back was not for casual socializing. The back was for sex.” 12 Two rooms made up the back - each with its own specialized equipment, including slings, benches covered in foam, mirrors, various types of tables, extra beams for bondage, etc. All needs and concerns were attended to: different types of music, smoothly sanded wooden floors, the thermostat set high, the lights low. The Catacombs, forced to move from this house several years later, was nonetheless recreated as The Catacombs II, with much of the same art and equipment in a new space.
The Zone in West Hollywood
Henry Urbach SITES 25 p 90-1
Gay men’s sex clubs are different from back rooms in several important ways - there is no other program other than sex, so it is clear why one is there. There is no dance floor and no bar (liquor and sex together violate certain city codes). Cubicles are present, often with no or only a half door. Slings and other paraphernalia might be installed. One sex club, The Zone, in West Hollywood, could represent many of these places. It is near a clearly visible gay strip of boulevard, but set back and somewhat hidden. A parking lot discreetly separates it from the straight world and offers a security buffer. It advertises itself by word of mouth, through some advertising and promotional materials. Past the front door, encoded by a single purple light, one enters a small room to pay his fee, read a set of rules, pick up condoms and lube. Next is a small lounge with pinball machines, chairs, coffee. Patrons then proceed into a labyrinth of hallways, cubicles, lounges, balconies, and various interstitial spaces filled with bodies having sex. Here again, there is some reclaiming of other spaces: “The sex club further brings the city within its interior by reframing a variety of elements from the landscape of homoerotic desire. The charged spaces of locker rooms, bleachers, and saunas, public bathrooms, sidewalks, and alleysways: these spatial tropes re-emerge inside the club to refer to and reinvent, a half-real, half-imaginary landscape beyond.”

Most striking in Henry Urbach’s account of The Zone is the complementary, even facilitory nature of the architecture with the sex; “Find the bleachers at the far edge of the lounge. Note how
"Continue through the doorway to the labyrinth of cells, adjust to dim lighting, the bass of techno-pop, the urgent fragrance of sweat and breath and body fluids, the black walls and cement floors. Walk along a twisting narrow corridor past 4' by 4' booths whose doors expose the upper body but conceal the midsection and crotch of the cell occupants. Explore further; acknowledge someone's stare. Pass another booth where an encounter has already begun.

Exit the labyrinth at the rear and move along a brick wall painted white. Peer through windows fitted with metal bars into the narrow space behind; find the passageway at the far corner and traverse the alley along its length, past the metal platform, toward the dark corner where they are waiting.

Come out again and move around to the other side of the labyrinth. Huddle beneath the stairs with dozens of others. Rub against the walls; rub against the bodies.

... Move further along to a balcony where a screened aperture frames a view into the labyrinth of cells below. Survey the scene, peer into the booths, watch those who watch: share others' intimacy."

Henry Urbach "Spatial Rubbing"
SITES 25 p 94
the vertical spacing of bleacher risers position mouths and genitals for easy coupling. Observe that the bleachers situate spectators as participants, participants as spectacle. In the sex club, architecture and bodies converge. Rubbing, piercing, probing: these activities are enacted at once spatially and sexually, with walls as with flesh. Bodies crowd into corners, into chambers and doorways, under stairs - intensifying the erotic encounter by pressing up against spatial boundaries.”

He goes on to cite several other sex clubs and the innovative ways they have played with the architecture to heighten the patrons' experience. One club situated its movie screen several feet away from a wall to allow sex behind it, mimicking the sex on the screen. Another used gratings and mirrors to facilitate views between the booths.

At the turn of this century, the public bathhouse was already a popular meeting place for all sorts of men, as a place to relax, get away, close a deal. The spaces in these early bathhouses could include a pool, steam room, massage rooms, showers, warm room, and lockers, and still allowed patrons not seeking sex to use the facilities. These bathhouses became popular for gay men as discreet places to meet, evolving from low levels of sexual activity to ones which catered particularly to a gay clientele (1920-30's). They included private dressing rooms or cubicles, which once locked, allowed the manager to avoid responsibility for what took place there. Bathhouses opened specifically as gay men's sex spaces in the '50s and '60s. By 1996, over 200 gay male bathhouses existed in the United States alone, despite a spate of closings in the early '80's due to the hysteria surrounding AIDS.
ComingTogether

above John Paul Ricco A/R/C 1994-5 p 26
right Mark Thompson Leatherfolk 173
Modern bathhouses, dating from the 1970s, designed specifically for gay men and sexual activity, no longer hid from view. They “established themselves as a major gay institution that could both shape and respond to the rapid social, sexual, and political changes that were taking place.” Innovations included orgy rooms for communal sex, projected video rooms (which encouraged masturbation before the threat of AIDS did), dance floors, cabaret with live entertainment, movie nights, holiday parties, cafes with food, theme nights, even voter registration. And notably cleaner facilities. There was even a nationwide corporate chain of bathhouses.

To keep things exciting, there was still the simulation of more dangerous spaces: “mazes recreated park bushes and undergrowth. Steam rooms and gyms recreated YMCAs. Video rooms and movie theaters recreated the balconies and back rows of movie theaters. . . Cells recreated and transform the environment of prisons and jails, where generations of gay men had ended up for having sex in toilets, parks, and the YMCA.” Architecture was reminiscent of locations familiar to many gay men, but “cleaner, safer and with plenty of free parking.”

These different places have several things in common. Many mention a labyrinthine design (the unknown just ahead). This maze allows the gay man to ramble, to cruise, to let opportunities present themselves, to let desire take it course. A sense of danger is created purposefully in the recreation of many truly risky sex environments (parks, prisons, public bathrooms, etc) and ones which are particular to the culture of gay men and anonymous sex. Also, there are opportunities for both private
Sex furniture designed by John Lidell

Dangerous Bedfellows Policing Public Sex p76, 78 79

Social Structure-8 (qty 4) Pinwheel of Dead Ends
“As examples of minor architecture (in opposition to major/majority/masterly), jack-off rooms are articulated by queers (minorities), whose identities are anything but constant, unified, and self-evident; rather, they are always in the process of becoming, changing, and being contested. Here, queers are part of an assemblage or multiplicity of anonymous bodies within a small, dark, cramped space, touching, kissing, licking, hugging, stroking, pumping. Borders between self and not-self are radically undermined.”

John Paul Ricco “Coming Together”
A/R/C 1994-95 p 27
and communal sexual encounters, facilitated by the variety of sizes and layout of rooms. At times spectacle is stressed and encouraged, cruising is easy, many men might share one room; at other intersections and in the cubicles, there is more privacy. An article by sex club owner John Lidell discusses his own vision for a newly built sex club, many of the features designed to facilitate safe sex - better lighting for those clients wishing to check their partners' physical health (ie, to look for sores, KS lesions, etc), peepholes and open cubicles for better surveillance and self-policing of unsafe sexual practices, low wall-mounted washbasins to promote better genital hygiene. One other interesting point he makes is the recreation not of other more dangerous venues for sex, but of childhood type spaces (forts built of sheets, tents, appliance boxes) "associated with play, fantasy and independence from adult control." He then relates these types of play spaces with the docks at the end of Christopher Street in New York City, of exploration of and sex among the ruins.

Will women feel comfortable in these types of settings? Will women like the aspect of danger? Without the same history of public sex, will the same recreations have any resonance for them? Are there other places that can be recreated to make women comfortable having public sex? Will the idea of spectacle encourage or discourage sex?
I never felt envy at the freedom Fred had at finding sex readily available in any public park, in gay porn theaters, in most back rooms in bars, in every city in the world. It was not until the early 1980's, in the midst of the modern Gay and Lesbian Movement and the beginnings of the AIDS crisis, that lesbians began talking about sex and looking to our gay male friends for new models of sexual expression. Discussions started by local S/M groups, the furor over Man-Boy love, and a burgeoning gay and lesbian national press saw the beginnings of radical views of women's sexual lives. Today, lesbians have their own small pornographic industry (film, video, and print), women's sex stores exist in many cities, and lesbian educational events regarding pornography and practice are held often (even in Boston!). Provincetown itself, a small resort town on Cape Cod, supports as many as three women's sex stores during the summer months, giving workshops, selling toys, leather, latex, books, and videos.

Once defined by the leftover space of a bar, later by women centers, dances, causes, potlucks and meetings, and finally by claiming more public territory through visibility, lesbians have created a subculture often defined not so much by a concrete location as by events and our presence. This territory might encompass the street during a demonstration, a concert hall during an Indigo Girls concert, or a straight bar given over to lesbians only on a Sunday night. Or even a night once a week which shifts from bar to bar within a city. The G-Spot is the hot place to be on a Saturday night in San Francisco, but you have to know where to find it each week. Why such transitory space? Why not more permanent, even institutional types of spaces?
Many bars and coffee houses have come and gone, often blamed on the low economic power of lesbians. Few bars or bookstores were or are owned by lesbians, but instead space is rented from a (usually heterosexual) man. If the spot has become popular enough, the rent might increase. “Because research shows that most Lesbians come to bars to socialize, to dance, to shoot pool, and so on, and not to drink (Levi 1980), in order to pay the raised rent either the entrance fee or the price of drinks must be raised. The lower discretionary income of women compared to men usually means the patronage drops. Eventually the bar closes... This is one of the reasons for the short existence of most lesbian bars in New York and other cities.”

There are also many more options available for meeting other lesbians and spending our money: social, political, religious, spiritual, athletic, and you-name-it groups are now available. Still, lesbians have lacked the financial resources and political clout necessary to design and build their own institutions, or even have the hope to consider what they might be like (which is a very good reason to design one).

A different reason might also be an unwritten way of territorializing (claiming) space wherever we happen or want to be, and destabilizing/deterritorializing space as we move from street corner to street corner. Shifting identities, and the plurality of queerness might be reflected in how we shape (move) and reshape the spaces we inhabit. That is, given the subjectivity of identity, the performative nature of gender and sexuality, and tired of being stuck in a back alley bar, lesbians are now popping up everywhere, roving sexualized urban streets.
Sally Munt, in “The Lesbian Flâneur” writes: “A subculture made invisible by its parent culture logically resorts to space-making in its collective imagination. Mobility within that space is essential, because motion continually stamps new ground with a symbol of ownership.” For Munt, the flâneur is a cross-dressing lesbian, gazing and meeting the gaze, caught in the maze of the streets of desire. “Within the labyrinth, the process of making up meaning in movement becomes the point, and perversely too the pleasure, as we become lost among the flowing images. This act of performative interpretation is crystallised in this early tale of lesbian cross-dressing...”

Part of our success must be in the re-shaping of lesbians' own self-images related to desire. Lesbians are women after all, acculturated to believe our own sexual desires don’t exist (virgin), or are acted out as a temptress of men (whore). Pulp fiction of the ‘50s, and other images have linked lesbians with the femme fatale of film noir and with the sexualized anxieties of the city. Pornographic representations of “lesbian” desire, almost always produced and manipulated by straight men to be enjoyed by other straight men never look authentic. Mainstream images (also produced by straight men) have shown lesbians as little more than affectionate huggers, or completely desexualized suicidal neurotics who hang ourselves once even the slightest hint of desire is made plain. Often The Act itself is never at issue, leading many non-lesbians to confirm their unimaginative suspicions that lesbians don’t really “do” anything anyway, and that lesbian sex is not “real” sex. Writes Julie Kristeva “Lesbian loves comprise the delightful arena of a neutralized, filtered libido, devoid of the erotic cutting edge of
CONSTRUCT YOUR OWN IDENTITY
with Gertrude and Alice
xerox pages and cut out
Trina Robbins Hysteria Summer 1993
“Lesbian identity is constructed in the temporal and linguistic mobilization of space, and as we move through space we imprint utopian and dystopian moments upon urban life. Our bodies are vital signs of this temporality and intersubjective location. In an instant, a freeze-frame, a lesbian is occupying space as it occupies her. Space teems with ‘possibilities, positions, intersections, passages, detours, u-turns, dead-ends [and] one-way streets’ [Sontag 1979:13]; it is never still.”

Sally Munt “The Lesbian Flâneur”
David Bell mapping desire p 125
“None of the action in lesbian backrooms violates the state health rules on public sex - a fringe benefit of men’s inability to imagine lesbian fucking?”

Donna Minkowitz “See What the Girls in the Backroom Will Have”
The Village Voice June 30, 1992
masculine sexuality. Light touches, caresses, barely distinct images fading one into the other, growing dim or veiled without bright flashes into the mellowness of a dissolution, a liquefaction, a merger.

Lesbian sex spaces, however, capitalizing on a model of gay men’s sex spaces, have certainly belied the stereotype of the desexualized lesbian. They have appeared in only semi-permanent quarters: the back rooms of well established gay men’s bars, a San Francisco bathhouse, a men’s sex club with a lesbian night in West Hollywood. A few lesbian bars have adopted the raunchier aspects of gay and straight men’s bars, including drag and strip shows, and their own back rooms for group sex. Some came and went within a year, closed by lack of demand, or forced to close by the city’s political machine. Some have been around for years, catering to few, while recently seeing a huge increase in popularity. Some are new and thriving. It is enough of a phenomena to warrant several articles on these places.

One backroom opened in New York city in 1991, in a men’s bar, decorated with vulvas for its weekly women’s night. “It’s deliberately unchic: the promoters have determined this will be a democratic, unbourgie kind of place, and unlike gay men’s sex clubs of the ’70’s, there’s no cover charge or door policy to separate clone from prole.”

The scene is described: a dark room, many anonymous bodies, a sense of freedom at not second guessing the politics or looks of the woman who is stroking your nipples from behind. The place gives permission to do things women are generally taught not to do. Our heroine writes: “... why should tofu by candlelight be the prerequisite for getting
laid? . . . sex here is separate from the world outside - it doesn’t violate vows of monogamy, or enter the partners into ‘relationship.’” 27 The Labia Lounge closed sometime later due to financial concerns, but by then another place had opened. “This one has a cover charge, expensive furnishings, artsy male and female go-go dancers, and trendoid dykes from NYU. Though clientele’s less sexy, the backroom’s infinitely more luxurious: mirrors! couches! lighting! . . . Jane and I were almost beside ourselves - but we missed the old grimy room where a more democratic ambiance had made the sex funkier - and hotter.” 28

The Clit Club in New York, which existed as a club night in another bar, was one of the first places opened to women in hopes of creating a charged sexualized atmosphere where exploring public sex was encouraged. The choice of name alone was a profound political act by the two lesbians of color who opened the place. One, Jocelyn Taylor, spoke about starting the club: “Since public sexualized space for lesbians was pretty nonexistent, the Clit Club was really an unprecedented experiment. We decided to employ tactics that we already knew worked, like having go-go dancers, erotic lesbian slides, and lesbian porn. Although the porn wasn’t always made by women for women, it was imagery about women together that we incorporated into our space, and it was amazing.” 29 In 1992 a backroom, darkly lit, complete with shackles and safe sex paraphernalia, was added, which for a variety of reasons never caught on. One complaint was the lack of horizontal surfaces women wanted in their sex spaces. “I think the reason [women
corn envy?
advertisement from On Our backs
Chris StraAYER Deviant Eyes Devient Bodies p287

didn't play} in the Clit Club was . . . the vertical surfaces and standing room only . . . when women had to stand up, they didn't like sex much . . . I do think the comfort of the place in which folks play has a lot to do with what's likely to happen . . . It's not that people weren't having sex in the space - girls were having sex in the bathroom and behind the bar - they just weren't doing it in what I would call a performative arena. It wasn't the kind of situation like a lot of gay male backrooms, where it might be completely dark or where you're just sort of feeling your way around. The backroom at the Clit Club was more about someone going in and enjoying themselves, with other people watching the proceedings . . . 30

Another pervasive problem for these sex clubs was an ignorance of the etiquette necessary for public sex. The Zone in West Hollywood, mentioned earlier, added a women's sex night, only to have it close six months later. One club member is quoted as being interrupted in the middle of a “sapphic adventure” by someone from work wanting to talk shop. At the Ecstasy Lounge (in the gay men's club Eros) in San Francisco, employees became too zealous in their policing for safe sex, which offended many of the patrons. Gayle Rubin, a well-known lesbian author/activist on the topic of S/M and sexuality, said “The population that is going to these clubs is undersocialized in term of how to behave at sex parties. A lot of women who are accustomed to bar behavior bring that into sex spaces. They'll get drunk, get rowdy, talk loudly, or violate unwritten territorial rules, like getting too close into other people's scenes . . . To be successful at a sex party, you have to follow certain forms of courtesy and etiquette.” 31
One last issue is that many women’s nights are held in gay men’s spaces and these locales didn’t necessarily provide the kind of places women needed for public sex. Aside from the issue of standing versus lying down, one woman also commented “Men really like an environment that’s dark, dirty, quiet, and underground, while women feel safer when it’s aboveboard and legal.” Though I know plenty of women who would disagree (at least in theory), certainly the women interviewed in these articles expressed concern regarding their safety, particularly in outside settings. They pointed out that gay men are men after all, and so were more at ease with walking in public places after dark.

“Imagine the women of American Gladiators having whatever kind of sex they want in public spaces: that’s the gay male sluts represented to me.”

Donna Minkowitz “See What the Girls in the Backroom Will Have”
The Village Voice June 30, 1992
The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

images
p 52-53 Edmund Gillon, Jr Provincetown Discovered p 91
p 54 right Charles Foster
The Cape Cod National Seashore

peso COD NATIONAL SEASHORE
AUTHORIZED BOUNDARY
LAND AREA Open for Public Use

CAPE COD BAY

NANTUCKET SOUND
Cape Cod is Massachusetts' large peninsula, a sandy moraine jutting into the Atlantic Ocean. At the very tip of it, where the Pilgrims first landed in 1620, is Provincetown. Sparsely settled through most of the colonial era, by the mid-1800's it sustained one of the largest fishing industries in the state, manned mainly by Yankee, Nova Scotian, and Portuguese sailors. Over 1,000 ships at a time could drop anchor in her harbor. In 1850, over 50 docks lined the shore. By the late 1800's, however, the fishing industry began falter, due to a declining market for saltwater fish, the obsolescence of whale oil, and overfishing in the area.

Around the same time, the town became a major tourist attraction and was very accessible by the Old Colony Railroad which terminated at the end of McMillian Pier. A bohemian crowd of artists and writers, especially those from New York's Greenwich Village, including Eugene O'Neill, discovered the charm of this sleepy fishing village and began to summer there. They groomed P'town into a retreat for the avant garde, many of whom were gay men. In 1961 the National Seashore was established, assuring Cape Cod would remain available to many as a recreation spot. Today Provincetown, while barely supporting a winter population of just over 4,000 people, is overrun by 20,000 to 30,000 visitors each summer, many of them in residence. Throngs of gay men and lesbians flock there as tourists, taking over the town in the summer months, shopping, eating, exploring the dunes of the National Seashore. Many own and work in the hundreds of businesses - restaurants, bed and breakfasts, and stores, which cater specifically to the gay and lesbian community. There are plenty of things to do - afternoon teasdances, nights out at clubs hosting drag shows, comedy acts, singers, and other forms of live
1893 map showing old wharves
from the Provincetown Museum

image below
I Ruckstuhl Old Provincetown p 41
entertainment. The streets are a stage to quite a range of spectacle, from drag queens to leathermen to leather dykes. Despite supporting several men's bars, and at least 2 women's bars, there is alas, no women's sex club there as yet.

The character of the town itself changes with the season and weather. One main street, Commercial Street, runs parallel with the beach a mere 100 feet away to the south, as the town curves around the inside of the peninsula. This street is lined with the old colonials and warehouses of the previous century, all of them renovated, added to, and profoundly altered over the years. Barely a scrap of land has not been built on. Narrow passageways between buildings might support a tiny art store, while a bed and breakfast in a grand house keeps growing with every new deck, porch, and wing. The density of buildings and people can be overwhelming.

[Note: what's referred to as the West End and East End of town is reversed from what intuition might suggest - the arm of the Cape has curled in on itself, so that as you enter Provincetown you are actually traveling west along Commercial Street, with the Atlantic Ocean to your left, to the south.]

My particular site is located in one of the last open pieces of land around. It is an 80' by 185' slot between an old closed fire department building, similar in size and roof to the many other colonials in town (20' to the cornice, 30' to the peak of the roof), and a low lying building which currently houses Babula's, a restaurant. The land itself is part of an official town landing (#4), and part of the generous parking lot surrounding the
1/30" SITE MODEL (with sketch model in site)
restaurant. Bubula's, unlike the other buildings around her, is set back from the edge of the street, providing space in front for a small outdoor cafe.

The view through the parking lot is unimpeded and takes one straight out to the ocean. To the left is a view of McMillian Wharf, and several other small piers. It is easy to look along the beach in both directions and observe the many decks, shacks, boat rentals, and stores, and the many people using them. A small rise up Commercial Street to the west affords a good view of the project as one walks into the heart of town.
An advantage of the site was that sight lines could be developed that deal with the ocean, making the path through the building fairly directed. Several approaches seemed viable early in the process, but a tube like building with openings at each end fit the project nicely. There might be an opportunity to play the urban end off of the more organic one, though I was shy in developing the building along the organic argument. (A good reason to avoid curves, as well). Organicism would symbolize too much of an essentialist approach, which as I feminist I never believed in. But it didn’t necessarily mean some water theme, even some spiritual references, might not be employed. Certainly, the building had to connect and make a statement about it’s relationship to the beach and water.

The site also allows for a presence on the street - something important in terms of the statement I wanted this building to make. There should be an almost civic quality to the building, as it takes its place as an Institution in the lesbian community (similar to the presence of the brothel in a Western movie). It would not be a place which conveyed any shame in what it was about by receding from the street. This was also a good reason to avoid fitting the building into the literal context of Provincetown - I knew I would avoid making a structure too similar to the buildings along Commercial Street. No gable end, no shingles. It would however relate to the bustle and excitement of Commercial Street that makes P’town so wonderful. Cruising is a big recreational activity for many visitors and permanent residents. It would be important to bring the joy of the street into the building in some way.
early plans developing
relationship between
building and water

two 1/30" sketch models
image p 64 Samuel Chamberlain
Cape Cod in the Sun p 91

1/30" conceptual model
showing 3 systems:
pipegrid
waterworld
objects
images
p 66 view down Commercial Street looking northeast
p 67 top view of site from beach looking west
p 67 bottom view of site looking southeast directly across Commercial Street
The sweat bath used by the Havasupai Indians
Allan Konya Finnish Sauna p 6

images p 69
right “Entertainments at a House of Pleasure.”
during the Edo period, lavish brothels and tea-
houses usually provided bathhouses where could
relax and refresh themselves
left The Cave of Forgotten Return in Katsuura
Peter Grilli Furo: The Japanese Bath p 61
an utaseyu shower at a Japanese hot spring
Leonard Koren
Undesigning the Bath p. 55
I wasn't entirely confident that a women's sex club without any other program would be able to succeed. Somehow, I felt women needed a little more help. Judging by the lack of etiquette mentioned earlier, the idea of including a bathhouse in the building made sense. Bathhouses had a long history of doubling as brothels, were already used as sex spaces by gay men, (and some women), and most importantly, provided a set of rituals in a place and culture that was sorely lacking in them. That is, if one of the main complaints of lesbians was that they lacked the proper etiquette to have public sex, then providing a very structured environment, already highly ritualized could provide just the framework necessary to make lesbians feel comfortable (directed) having public sex. Also, creating a sense of community had always been part of lesbian culture. A bathhouse would also provide an excuse beyond sex for being naked, and particularly appealing was the notion of checking all of one's baggage and signifiers at the door - that is, just as the Romans envisioned their baths as a truly democratic space (not entirely true in practice), this would also be a place where everyone entered on the same naked level. For women who were particularly modest, there was always the option of wrapping your towel around yourself, or sticking to the second floor.

The bathhouse idea soon incorporated an entire waterworks. Besides a variety of baths (both sizes and temperatures) there would be a water channel/slot running the entire length of the building, linking all of the baths together, providing visual continuity between inside water and outside water, and quite graphically speaking to the idea of Wetness and the Slot (crack, whatever). A pipegrid, hanging 10 feet above, would provide
men's hammam Istanbul
Alev Crouter Taking the Waters p 93
image p 73
Peter Grilli Furo: The Japanese Bath
p 162
uptake and drainage, displaying the mechanical workings of the water system. The pipes would not only send down shoots into the pools and baths, but could also release vapor and steam in certain areas, double as a heating system, and be perforated (and carefully controlled) to create walls of water between some of the baths. Water became a screening device in this way, both visually and aurally. Also, showers could pour from the pipes above for massage, and at the entrance into the middle section of the building, (satisfying state laws requiring a shower before entering a communal bath, as well as becoming a ceremonial point). Eventually, the very exterior front of the building had one horizontal pipe providing showers for those coming in from the beach who might want to rid themselves of sand before even entering the building.

Baths themselves already were highly coded in many other cultures - Japanese cultures used them for gossip, relaxation, and community; the Jewish mikvah was a more severe cleansing ritual; Finnish baths were often joyful family affairs; and the bania, the Russian bath, also had been the site for both births and premarriage rituals; Roman baths of course were already associated with a cult of exercise, the body, democratic space, and eventually hedonistic pleasures; the Turkish hammam, a place of religious contemplation and cleansing. And in the early 1900's, health spas became popular, as hydrotherapy, and other medicinal benefits were attributed to special waters. Each of these prototypes offered some piece to the project. From Roman and Turkish baths came ideas of procession, ritual, order, hierarchy, as one moved back and forth in a specific order, between different baths and activities (such as massage, depilation, or washing). The lighting and sounds of the ham-
hammam were particularly appealing, since creating a certain ambiance was so important to people's comfort. The noises of splashing, dripping, draining, flowing, and hissing water could mingle with the sounds of sex, and create a kind of background music to the events. The lighting in a hammam, with its huge overhead domed roof and small cutouts was recreated in the four smallest baths. Also, Japanese and Finnish baths were often made of wood and it gave me a chance to consider materials and what they might mean and feel like.

the hammam at Qal'at al-kahf plan
John Phillips a 13th Century Isma'ili Hammam at Qal'at al-Kahf. The Antiquaries Journal p.66
right hammam
Leonard Koren Undesigning the Bath p.82
above Vierodt Baths plan
right Gosertede Baths Hanover 1903
Dieter Leister The Water Temple p 109
above The Roman Irish Bath plan
Baden-Baden Germany
Alev Croutier Taking the Waters p 132
right a typical medium sized bath of
the Roman Provinces plan
William Sloan M Arch Thesis
MIT Dept of Architecture 1977 p 21
**Program**

in square feet
(some figures are approximate)

**building total 20,000**

**first floor 16,380**

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<tr>
<th>Area</th>
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<td>toilet block, 8 stalls, 1 hc stall</td>
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**back area 4675**

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<td><strong>dock</strong></td>
<td>2830</td>
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<tr>
<td>long pier (72x18)</td>
<td>1296</td>
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second floor 3615

- porn theater: 1175
- outside deck: 495
- 5 sex cubicles (8x6): 240
- toilet block, 8 stalls, 1 hc stall: 517
- balconies and hallways: 254

Arita hot springs Japan
Alev Croutier Taking the Waters p 103
two early floor plans in relief

image p 81

painting by Jean-Leon Gerome Terrace of the Seraglio 1886

Alev Croutier Taking The Waters p 92
“People uncomfortable with sex may prefer a sex club because it is outside their everyday environment. But while some people may feel more comfortable having sex in a dark basement or warehouse, others might feel transgressive having sex in a space styled as a copy of the family room.”

John Lindell “Public Space for Public Sex”
Dangerous Bedfellows Policing Public Sex p 74
You are walking down Commercial Street, down a small hill, watching the people coming and going. In front of you is the side of a building, full of women hanging out on the second floor deck. This side is tight up against Bubula’s, closing in the restaurant’s outdoor cafe. The exterior side walls, and just part of the front first floor wall are board and batten. The roof is tin. It recalls a time when long low warehouses lined the shore, containing salt or fish. But this building is full of women. A warehouse of women. Maybe some architect’s funny idea about commodifying those inside.

You notice the front is disconnected from the long middle section - different roofs with a skylight in between. They’re at slightly different angles, too. The front section follows the sidewalk of Commercial Street. It is a glass and steel box, with round double columns. A large part of it is transparent to the outside world. Women sit out front along some low bleachers, watching people walk by on the main drag. Only a block away, people are doing the same thing out in front of Spiritus Pizza. A few women are standing at the top of the bleachers, using the showers attached to the front wall of the building, rinsing off the sand from their day at the beach. Around to the left side is a small alleyway, open to patrons, and used by the staff to reach their own small house to one side of the building.

Once entering you realize the interior grid of the building follows some other logic. You stop at the check-in counter and office, show your membership card, pay your buck, grab a towel. This entry hall is divided by the elevator and stairs. A steel grate covers them like a wall. Once you’ve checked in, you peer through the screening and catch a glimpse of the interior of the building. The locker room is in front of you, where you can disrobe and put your clothes in a basket. You pass by the counter selling sex toys, and glance at the sign. It encourages everyone to bring their own toys and outlines safe(r) sex guidelines. You’ve already decided to go to WetWorld first and save DryWorld (where you remain clothed) on the second floor for next time. Just off the locker room is an opening to the west corridor, which runs the length of the building. But you take the main path back into the middle, to another grander foyer. You now ceremoniously cross the threshold, through the spray of overhead showers, wading through a shallow triangular pool to enter the middle part of the building.

Once stepping across the pool, you enter a world turned inward, truly interior, focused only on the activities taking place within. The side walls, covered in warm plywood on the inside, contain no windows and no distractions. The place is built almost entirely of thick cast-in-place concrete, with stairs, ramps, grates, and benches of heavy wood decking, recalling a
front elevation. note outside showers available and view of porn theater on the second floor

above front elevation
left front view of 1/8" model
image p 85 from the movie Lianna
Boze Hadleigh The Lavendar Screen p 237
“Before entering, it is necessary to consent to club rules:

You must not be a police officer, on or off duty

You must understand that you may witness others engaging in anal or oral sex, and that this type of activity does not offend you

You must have a valid picture ID

You must be gay

You must be a member of another local sex club or sponsored by a Zone member

You must understand that someone may touch you without your consent, and that this type of activity does not offend you”

Henry Urbach “Spatial Rubbing”

SITES 25 p 94
toilet block (view of north side without wall)   1/8" model
modern beachhouse. Some interior walls are made of wood studs sheathed in the same warm plywood of the side walls. You realize how bare the building is. Inside, women function as the ornament. Though it’s not as gritty or dirty as the men’s sex clubs you’ve been to, you experience this as a powerful place: solid concrete; dark, wet wood; severe, even macho. It exists on the edge between the feminine and the masculine. It has both meanings.

This is an interior landscape dotted by events or objects, each leading you through the labyrinth. Light is carefully controlled through the strip of skylight above. The relationship to the outside consists of a cluttered view through the glazed end of the building and glimpses of blue sky and dark seawater. To your right runs a long tall concrete wall, which constantly opens and closes to allow passage through to the west corridor. You already know the corridor contains five small sex cubicles, and four small hammam-type baths. You realize the huge wall runs right through the front cube, jutting out the front wall of the building. To the left is the large wall enclosing the toilet block. Several level changes cross the space. You can linger at this first large landing, deciding to go left, right or straight ahead. Descending a few stairs, you are now at the main bath. There are still many options: enter the bath, go through the big wall to your right, follow up a ramp to your left, sit on the wall and watch. You enter the main bath, sitting on one of the smooth polished concrete bleachers, happy to be with these other women. There’s some noise coming from somewhere and you notice a sheet of water separating you from a smaller communal bath. It is easy to wade through and see what fun is taking place on the other side of the waterwall.

You resume your tour down the center of the space. Everywhere you hear the sounds of water and of women. There is yet another large open area for socializing, cruising, resting, displaying oneself. To the right against the big wall is a cold plunge bath with a small waterfall, and water streaming out of some of the overhead pipes, massaging the women who sit under them. You think about the Roman name for this bath: frigidarium. Ahead and to the left are low walls made of translucent glass. You can’t quite see in, especially because steam has condensed inside the glass. You see some green inside too. You go in there and join several other women stretched out on the wooden bleachers, working up a sweat. Steam rises from the pool there. The place is also a greenhouse, full of exotic flowers and plants, also enjoying the hot sticky air. You decide to check out one of the side corridors and find it dim - women are in couples or groups, pressed up against the plywood walls in the narrow space between wall and column. Some women are using the square double posts as a brace. A woman from the staff leads another woman out a small side door, taking her home at the end of her shift.
"These anterior spaces (halls, vestibules) to these posterior rooms (jack-off rooms) function as thresholds or in-between zones: spaces for waiting, cruising, anticipating, deciding - or (even in one bar) playing a round of pinball."

John Paul Ricco "Coming Together"
A/R/C 1994-5 p.28
It's hot and time to go outside on the back dock. As you head up the ramp at the end of the building you catch only a glimpse of some women on the beach below, shielded by the end retaining walls of the building on one side, and screened by the many piers on the other. They are lying on wooden decking covered with the plastic covered foam mats of cheap beach furniture. Out on the dock, you take a long walk down the pier, pass one of the staffwomen and wonder what you’ve missed. It’s late afternoon and the place will slowly change from the mellow older set to a younger, raunchier crowd.

On your next trip, you don’t strip in the locker room, but go upstairs to check out the scene. Women are lounging around on low carpeted bleachers watching Xena Warrior Princess reruns in the Porn Theater. There are just as many lounging behind the screen as are watching on the other side. Some lean over the balconies and bridges to scan the floor below. They have positioned themselves as the dominant ones, the voyeurs. A few woman in wheelchairs pass by you as you step outside and now participate in the crush of Commercial Street from above. You notice several women are sitting at a cafe across the street trying to watch Xena reruns also. Three women on the deck with you have headed off down the west hallway. A cute redhead is here too, and approaches you. You silently follow her to one of the cubicles. A condom machine and lube dispenser are attached to one wall. There is a low wooden deck built there, about the size of a double bed, with another one of the cheap plastic foam mats thrown over it. A beam, spanning between columns, flies through the walls and becomes part of the sex furniture, perfect for bondage. You think, “Not bad for a buck.”
left 1/16" model
right aerial view of 1/8" model
The organization of the building is fairly clear. One long building is divided into a front, middle, and back section. Also, there is a first and second floor, each with its own programmatic concerns. Materials differ between sections, from the glass and steel of the front, to the concrete and heavy wet wood of the middle, to the wood and sand of the docks. Each of these materials overlap at the intersections between the three parts. The long concrete wall, poking up above the roof, follows the grid of the middle section, and continues this into the front section. There is a collision here, as the interior walls, elevator, and bleachers continue follow this line, while the exterior walls, steel columns, and roof follow the grid of Commercial Street. The main structure of the middle section, independent of the stone walls, is comprised of doubled square wooden columns. They are spaced 3 pairs across, sitting on each edge (leaving a three foot gap between them and the wall), while another is set in the middle. The deep three foot wooden beams must span 36 feet on center. The space between the middle columns and the west ones is divided by the long concrete wall.

Several separate systems have been developed which function both independently and in concert with each other: WaterWorld, the Pipegrid (both discussed earlier in the Program section), The Labyrinth, Thresholds, the Concrete Wall, and the Structural System and Roof.
early plans
detail of front

section through front
front detail of 1/8" model
Peter Zumthor Thermal Bath at Vals p 55,10

left model
below plan
The Labyrinth

In thinking about how to make women feel comfortable, and in reviewing a lot of gay men's sex spaces, the idea of the labyrinth kept presenting itself. Though it was important to create an hierarchical path through the building to give a sense of ritual, that didn’t exclude the idea of giving women many different options of where they went. This would create a space that was non-judgmental - other users would have no idea if you had taken a path to the bathroom, steamroom, or to rendezvous with that cute redhead. Women could wander, be the flâneur, hunt, seek, explore and not feel commitments to going to one single destination. Also, it would recreate what for men at least were the familiar mazes of the bushes in Central Park, the labyrinth of the back alleys. For this reason, entry into the middle section offers three choices - through the grand middle opening, down the east corridor or down the west corridor. The big concrete wall opens many times to allow passage through, and several paths lead one across the space. A women can begin at the path down the middle, and then feather off to the edges, come, come back again to the middle and start the ritual again.
The result of this system, and also the early rejection of using organicism as a philosophy in the building, pushed the design toward the use of The Object. Certainly the entire building can be read as an object, but also the middle section can be viewed as its own independent city, dotted by events or objects as well. Each box - the sauna/greenhouse, the toilet block, the apartment-like cubicle complex, each bath, and the underdock area - dot a utopian landscape; a landscape full of little pavilions. Each then also supports its own structure. The toilet block holds up its own separate roof, as does the sauna/greenhouse, and cubicles. Only is this rule blurred by the presence of the long concrete wall. The wall functions on its own, but also doubles as the structural wall of the four hammam-type baths. It also helps hold up the second floor balcony by the cubicle complex.
section through steamroom/greenhouse, warm bath, cold plunge bath, and hammam-type baths
The Thresholds
The long path through the building necessitated some relief, therefore thresholds are created to further divide the space in cross section. One steps into the ceremonial triangular pool first. There are then several level changes: first down two feet to the main bath area, and then down three feet into the sauna/greenhouse. One proceeds up again to the original entry level at the back and finally has the choice of going down five feet to the beach below, or up a ramp to the docks above. This creates thresholds allowing one to regulate one’s own level of participation. Also, a major benefit of these level changes is to set up opportunities for exhibitionism and voyeurism, and create relationships of dominance and submission. Women can stand over one another, or parade around below, knowing there is an audience watching from one of the different levels above, or from the second floor balcony. This situation is also set-up on the outside second floor deck and the street below, and in the underdock area and deck above. This let tops and bottoms work out who they are, or want to be.
section looking southwest

section looking northeast
The Long Concrete Wall

The long, fractured concrete wall acts as a registration for the rest of the building. Without it, the place would be too maze-like and confusing. At 28 feet, it dominates the building, always allowing you to know where you are, even from the exterior where it is visible pushing through the roof. The wall acts as the device for carrying one grid into the front of the building.

The openings in the wall, the long slots (and the similar openings of the toilet block and cubicle complex, and the piers screening the underdocks sex space), are designed to control the user's views - women can hide, be only partially seen, or can show themselves completely. In some ways, much like the waterwalls, these act as screening devices or as a way to objectify the women. Only a fleeting image is possible as a woman walks along the corridor and passes by the brief opening. Only pieces of her can be seen. Only her voice might be heard. The widths are also designed to ensure the entries to the cubicles remain hidden from view, except at an extreme angle.

three early sections
Top view of separate roof structure coming through cubicle, bath and big concrete walls
Bottom view looking south
The Structural System and the Roof

While the front roof is set at a small angle rising to the west, the main roof is at its highest at the east edge, sloping slowly down toward the concrete wall and the west set of columns. At the highest point the east edge of the roof reaches 28 feet - the same height as the concrete wall, and also matches the ridges of the existing buildings in the area. At its lowest point, the roof is 17.5 feet. While the beams themselves run through slots in the concrete wall, the roof itself never touches it, but stops six feet short to allow light to enter a long strip of skylight, and filter down the wall. Due to water infiltration problems, a light-framed glazed cap was proposed to sit on the roof, spanning the wall and blocks below. This cap created yet another complete block of its own, comprised of the cubicle complex and the hammam-type baths. (It can be seen in the section drawings, but was never completed for the model). The low side of the roof is little more than a thin strip along the west side. The roof is also cutout above the underdock sex space to allow for that area to be totally outside, and showing the bare structural system. The last set of columns march right down the beach, piercing the dock, and overlapping the round piers there.

Second thoughts meant a re-design following final review. It would be far better to slope the main beams in the other direction, having the roof cover three quarters of the structure, again stopping short of the concrete wall. A smaller beam would meet in the middle post and head in the other (original) direction, to pick up the small strip of roof on the west side. This would solve any problems of water leakage, the glazed cap would no longer be necessary, and it would give the building the pitched roof of the surrounding buildings. Also, there was a question of the roof pushing our attention to the east wall, but then with no glazing, revealing nothing. Finally, this pitch would continue the zigzag of roofs lines between the firehouse to the east and Bubula’s own double gable to the west.
Think of all the sex you could have had instead of reading this. Think of all the sex you could of had while reading this. Think of all sex I could have had instead of writing this. Think of all the sex you could have had instead of reading this. Think of all the sex you could of had while reading this. Think of all sex I could have had instead of writing this. Think of all the sex you could have had instead of reading this. Think of all sex I could have had instead of writing this. Think of all the sex you could have had instead of reading this. Think of all sex I could have had instead of writing this. Think of all the sex you could have had instead of reading this. Think of all sex I could have had instead of writing this. Think of all the sex you could have had instead of reading this. Think of all sex I could have had instead of writing this. Think of all the sex you could have had instead of reading this.
1 Andrea Weiss. Vampires and Violets. p 3. Though discussing lesbian coding as a means of representation, Weiss shys away from the term “lesbian identity” as being too “unified a position.” She writes: “Even women who did acknowledge publically the sexual component of their love for other women often defined themselves by other terms, as Jeanne Flash Gray did, recalling her life in Harlem in the 1930s and 40s, ‘when we were Bull Daggers and Faggots and only whites were lesbians and homosexuals...’”

2 Among them: Lesbians Unleashing Sexual Taboos (LUST), mentioned in several books and articles.

3 Of course, lesbians have indeed been having some sorts of public sex throughout history, just not in the organized way discussed here.


8 Wayne Hoffman. “Skipping the Life Fantastic: Coming of Age in the Sexual Devolution” in David Bell and Gill Valentine, eds, Mapping Desire. p 347.


14 Urbach. p 94.
15 Bérubè. p 190.
16 Bérubè. p 200.
17 Bérubè. p 201-2.
18 This is a phrase Tom Sgouros, Jr uses to describe the plastic world in which we live, in his piece “Plastic Alligators.” He is a performance artist, fool, and circus impresario living in Potowomut, RI.
20 Wolfe. p 149.
21 Sally Munt. “The Lesbian Flâneur” in David Bell and Gill Valentine, eds, Mapping Desire. p 117. Mund on the lesbian flâneur writes: “During the 1920’s homosexuality was located in New York in two identifiable spaces, Greenwich Village and Harlem. Homosexuality was made permissible by journeying to a time-zone happening: one experienced a present event, rather than took one’s preformed sexual identity, intact and inviolate, to the party.”
22 Munt. p 120.
23 Munt. p 116
24 as Shirley McLaine did after realizing her fondness for Audry Heburn was unnatural in the film version of Lillian Hellman’s “The Children’s Hour”
27 Minkowitz. p 34.

All images are by the author unless otherwise noted.
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don’t forget to take this with you to Big Mo’s!
courtesy of Samois Coming to Power p 66
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