

Iconography of Comfort & the Bordello - Seeking De-Alienation in Discomfort

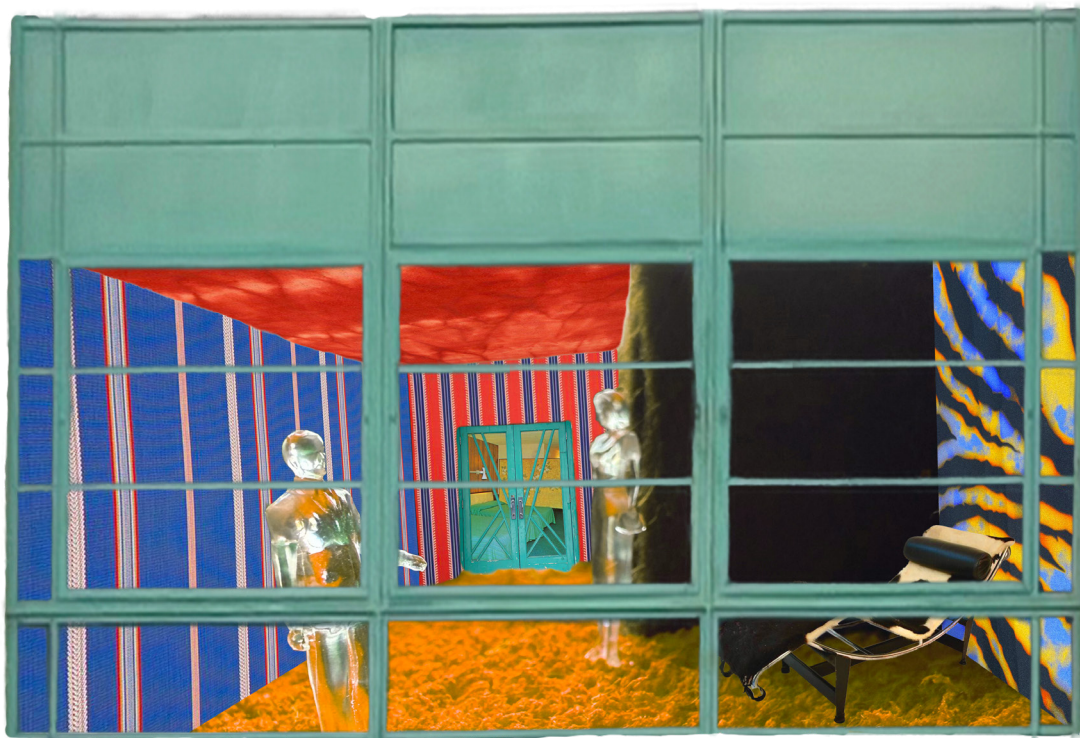


fig. 1
A collage of a brothel
room interior.

Imagine finding yourself suddenly awake in a bed that does not belong to you, but feels like it inherently does, or did once. The room around you is lit by a cold, clinical light that hurts your eyes with its intensity, and yet does not reach the edges of the space, making it seem vast in its unfamiliarity, even when the ceiling closes in on you. You are surrounded

by peculiar commodities that seem heavily personal, yet have no owner, nor do they paint a distinct picture of one. Here discomfort is a dissonance, a contradiction of senses. Here the space makes little sense, so you must seek it within you instead.

Introduction

Thus we should ask, in what ways can discomfort be a vehicle for comfort? To what extent can it become a tool of de-alienation in a late-stage capitalist world? In this essay, rather than providing an exhaustive account of how comfort and discomfort can be defined, I will focus on symbols of discomfort, and the political background that enables them to function as triggers of catharsis. I use the image of America as the primary point of reference, given the development of the USA being so deeply reliant on, and intertwined with, capitalism and consumerist aesthetic.

The approach of looking at America from the outside serves this project twofold. First, looking at it from the outsider's point of view helps position it as an object in its entirety, an image unto itself, a capitalist phantasmagoria. An example par excellence of this is Jean Baudrillard's America:

"Astral America. The lyrical nature of pure circulation. As against the melancholy of European analyses. The direct star-blast from vectors and signals, from the vertical and the spatial. As against the fevered distance of the cultural gaze.

Joy in the collapse of metaphor, which here in Europe we merely grieve over. The exhilaration of obscenity, the obscenity of obviousness, the obviousness of power, the power of simulation. As against our disappointed virginity, our chasms of affectation.

Sideration. Star-blasted, horizontally by the car, altitudinally by the plane, electronically by television, geologically by deserts, stereolithically by the megalopoloi, transpolitically by the power game, the power museum that America has become for the whole world."

(Baudrillard, 1986, p.27)

Second, it feeds into the voyeuristic discomfort-comfort dichotomy, where we are able to immerse ourselves in the sensation of suspended collapse without being directly affected by it, yet knowing it is right around the corner. It echoes Jameson's and Žižek's claim that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism" (Fisher, 2014, p.2). With regards to my project, instead of imagining impossible futures, I argue there is value in preserving the symbols of systemic lies, using the imagery of the system as an argument against itself. The key idea here is that of the visual of overexposed mass consumption left to rot and decay, revealing systemic failures in the process.

fig. 2
Las Vegas and the decorated
shed architecture.
via Vintage Images.



Comfort from Discomfort

When designing, or simply assessing, a space, one of the key metrics we employ is “comfort”. But what is comfort, exactly? Jacques Pezeu-Massabuau conceives of comfort not as an absolute, but a necessarily relative state that “exists only in approximation to a better or worse state that is of the same nature” (2012, p.9). He expands on this idea by identifying two aspects of comfort - pleasure and beauty. Further, he establishes that discomfort is comprised of privation, obligation, or aggression, but even so it is relative and malleable according to one’s own will and one’s culture (2012, pp.33-34).

That comfort is a relative state mirrors the findings of “The Paradox of Comfort”, which analyses how patients learn to deal with discomfort without being overtaken by it: “comfort is not an ultimate state of peace and serenity, but rather the relief, even temporary relief, from the most demanding discomfort.” (Morse, Botorff, Hutchinson, 1995). The central idea here is that there is no way of achieving the apex of comfort, but rather that an individual’s comfort is dependent on the discomfort it mitigates. Therefore, it is futile to speak of comfort in the absolute.

Aesthetics vs Symbolism and the ‘Decorated Shed’

If comfort in itself cannot be uniformly defined, or assigned a definite value, we could make the same assumption about beauty, or aesthetic valour. Venturi et al. define the ‘decorated shed’ (see fig. 2) as a building “with a rhetorical front

and conventional behind” (1972, pp.89-90) - it uses symbols via signage and ornament, unlike the ‘duck’ (see fig.3), which is in itself a symbol:

“The purest decorated shed would be some form of conventional systems-building shelter that corresponds closely to the space, structure, and program requirements of the architecture, and upon which is laid a contrasting - and, if in the nature of the circumstances, contradictory - decoration.”

(Venturi et al., 1972, p.100)

Modernists’ dismissal of ornament for ornament’s sake can be seen as hypocritical; modernist buildings have become ‘ducks’ by turning the whole structure into ornament. The claim that ‘form follows function’ is not sincere if the form of a residential home, for example, follows the function of an industrial factory (Venturi et al., 1972). The ornament of these buildings is in some ways covert, allowing modernists to critique explicit decoration as crude. But this crudeness might be just a matter of taste.

fig. 3
The Big Duck Building in
Flanders, New York.
via Wikimedia Commons.



Pop Culture, Kitsch & Hypercapitalist Aesthetic - Design Democratised or the Simulacrum of Choice?

Venturi et al. decry Modernist architects' disdain for suburbia:

"They recognise the symbolism, but they do not accept it. To them the symbolic decoration of the split-level suburban sheds represents the debased, materialistic values of a consumer economy where people are brainwashed by mass marketing and have no choice but to move into the tacky-tacky, with its vulgar violations of nature of materials and its visual pollution of architectural sensibilities, and surely, therefore, the ecology."

(Venturi et al., 1972, p.154)

To the authors of *Learning from Las Vegas*, there is value in the variety of symbolic ornament of the suburbia - it is a democratised expression of taste of the middle class*. In other words, rather than being passive in their consumption, people have a level of agency, and choose to express said agency by assigning meaning to what they consume. Similar sentiment is present in Gottdiener's claim that there is evidence of self-actualisation in making symbolic choices within the process of consumption (2001, pp.6-8)

Looking at consumer economy and its effects on pop-culture, Sianne Ngai explores the importance of "the cute, the interesting, and the zany" and "non-cathartic feelings that index situations of suspended agency" that arise

from "trivial aesthetic categories grounded in ambivalent or even explicitly contradictory feelings" (2011). In other words, she places kitsch as a crucial aesthetic aspect of late-stage capitalism. Ngai sees the 'cute' as an aesthetic of powerless consumerism, and the 'zany' as an "aesthetic of nonstop action"; but both as politically idle in a way.

In these examples vox populi is seen as either an aesthetic of uncontrolled consumerism or an almost revolutionary act of class consciousness - but what if it is neither of these, or perhaps rather both at the same time? What if more and more we become aware of systemic failures, and more and more we reckon with the futility of action? Rather than to fail, we choose to disengage. To try refute consumerism is a hopeless task, without organised action it is merely an individual act of moral grandstanding, but its reality is no longer easy to ignore either. We are surrounded from all sides by iconography of capitalism, by advertisements and objects of temporary desire, but that which is meant to entice us, may no longer do so due to overexposure.

If 'themed environments' (see fig.4) (Gottdiener, 2001) no longer evoke the desire they once did, but remain unchanged, they can instead create a sense of counter-desire, or the discomfort of having the memory of desire discordant with the emptiness felt in its stead.

* Venturi et al refer to the suburban middle classes - in the US most working people consider themselves middle class, and the term encompasses almost everyone who is not either very rich or desolately poor. A large portion of the American middle class would be considered part of the working class in Marxist terms.

Former Capitalist Monuments

Symbols change and shift meanings or associations over time. Take for example the concept of strip malls - once a symbol of prosperity, a vibrant social space, now more often associated with half empty structures emanating a deep sense of sadness. If architecture of symbols deteriorates, falls into disrepute, the symbols themselves become disfigured, or become caricatures of themselves. This is not a criticism of Venturi's idea, but an attempt to build upon it from a quasi-accelerationist perspective. I say quasi-accelerationist to denote a regressive or passive approach, but with accelerationist ambitions. Accelerationism at its core is the idea of 'speeding up' capitalism's downfall by destabilising it and exposing its faults and contradictions (Deleuze and Guattari, 1977, Fisher, 2020). Here, instead, I propose that by maintaining the deteriorating monuments of former capitalist glory, as symbols they will take on an anti-capitalist message by exposing the undelivered promises of the past.

The monuments I'm referring to are those of ordinary use with extraordinary symbolism. Just like the aforementioned 'decorated sheds' and American futuristic roadside architecture, the kitsch and hyper-consumerist aesthetic of the formerly desirable interior will become a reminder of what the system is not, and what it never really was. There is a danger here, perhaps, of on the surface appearing to glorify the past, but the alternative is a system which sheds its skin every time it so desires, in order

to clean up its image and dangle its brand new rendition in front of our eyes as distraction, whilst redefining the wrongs of the past as mere growing pains of progress.

It would seem that we are stuck between the 'Make America Great Again' ideology, and the self-cleaning system which "subsumes and consumes all previous history" (Fisher, 2014, p.4), but this I believe to be a false dichotomy - instead they go hand in hand. The popularity of MAGA, and similar such movements around the world, points to a tangible anger, but one that is misplaced, or rather intentionally misdirected away from systemic harms and inequalities, whilst the system monopolises on a sanitised version of nostalgia. My point here is that romanticised vignettes of the bygone days need to be replaced with symbols that accurately point out the system itself as the perpetrator of its past and present ills.

fig. 4
The Caesars Palace rotunda
in Las Vegas - an example of a
themed environment.
via Rachel Aston.



Erasure of Discomfort Points as Sanitisation of History

There is direct evidence of capitalism's self-cleaning mechanism in the Life magazine article "Erasing Grown-Up Vandalism" (which Venturi et al directly reference, but do not address its more insidious message):

"In some ways, the destructiveness of the young mirrors the values of the adult society. Too much of the American landscape has been 'vandalized' with sprawling suburbs, billboard alleys, overhead wires, porcelain gasoline stations hogging all four corners of an intersection and the strip mining that has brutalized whole regions of Appalachia and elsewhere."

(Life, 9 April 1971)

The article blames the visual ugliness of American excess capitalism, rather than its inherent systemic cruelty, for the discontent and rebellion of the youth. It goes on to praise initiatives such as the 1965 Highway Beautification Act, concluding that "[...] the adult society can begin to show the young that it really cares." This is, of course, all bunk. Youth rebellion and 'vandalism' in 1971 could be rationally attributed to the continuation of the Vietnam War, Richard Nixon's presidency, and the period of Great Inflation, not the 'ugliness' of billboards along Route 66. The previous entry in the magazine, "The Young Defacers" states briefly "Some attribute rising vandalism to the stresses of the times, but...", trailing off to blame almost everything but the "stresses of the times", and urging the need to "create

a respect for things in the minds of a younger generation" - the rest of the article reads like thinly veiled satire. Instead, it is a direct example of an attempt to sanitise the visuals of the system, rather than to address the systemic issues themselves.

fig. 5-6
Billboards and deteriorating signs.
via Francesco Aglieri Rinella.



To reiterate, the symbolic iconography of capitalism in the 1970s America became a cause of discomfort, for both the victims and the victors of the system. For the latter it was a sore spot that exposed the false promises of unrealised futures; it needed to be “erased” (borrowing this wording from Life, at least here accurate), replaced with newer, shinier iconography, fresher symbols that instilled the same unreal hopes. For some of the former, it resulted in what I shall here call ‘radical resignation’ - a sense of fatalism about the human condition. Joan Didion’s psychiatric report from the late 1960s encapsulates this feeling well:

“Patient’s thematic productions on the Thematic Apperception Test emphasize her fundamentally pessimistic, fatalistic, and depressive view of the world around her. It is as though she feels deeply that all human effort is foredoomed to failure, a conviction which seems to push her further into a dependent, passive withdrawal.”

(Didion, 1979, pp.14-15)

Such emotional state can be seen as a reflection of the postmodern condition, also reflected in Mark Fisher’s Capitalist Realism (2014). As mentioned in the paragraphs above, the ugliness of billboards could not itself be the cause for rebellion; it could, however, be a constant reminder of the ills of the system it represents. If we are the 1971 Life magazine, we see the billboards as a source of visual discomfort; if we are the people disillusioned with how things are, and where they are headed,

the billboards become a symbol of systemic discomfort, a wake up call, so to speak.

Discomfort as a Trigger for Catharsis

We can therefore begin to see discomfort as not merely a negative feeling, but a trigger for catharsis, a release mechanism of sort. If comfort works to sedate, to dull our senses, discomfort does the opposite - it sharpens them. Discomfort wakes us up to reality, partly due to biological factors. To quote designer Nanu Al-Hamad, “Comfort is the greatest disappointment that has ever existed. It doesn’t enable perspective. Anguish forces your way into awareness” (Chermayeff et al., 2017, p.13).

Pezeu-Massabuau also considers intentional seeking of discomfort: “Perhaps we could even desire discomfort [...] if we knew how to forge a path through it to well-being. Maybe we could develop a new hedonism out of it” (2012, pp.13-14). I would argue a hedonism of discomfort exists already, in the form of vices we willingly engage in, in romanticising pain and sadness, in indulgence, just as in deprivation. Spatially, it exists in systemised chaos. Venturi et al. point to the Vegas Strip as a system of contradictions, which come together and reinforce each other through the drastic contrast (1972, pp.20, 35, 49-50), referring to its architecture as that of “inclusion”, where the order works through its proximity to disorder (1972, pp.52-53). An order emerging from, or existing within, perceived disorder is at its core a form of comfort derived from discomfort.

How do we then design discomfort as a catharsis catalyst? Of course there exists hostile architecture, and equally hostile interiors, but I would argue they are not enough by themselves. They need an element of contrast for comparison, a bit of warmth, a spark to ignite the chain reaction. This polarity I argue can be achieved through nostalgia in the abandoned, eroticism in the uninviting, solace in the harrowing, and beauty in the kitsch of it all. And thus my project, through introducing that level of discomfort, of uncertainty, at the same time providing an intimate and vulnerable environment, aims to create that cathartic tension.

Proposal for the Hoover Brothel

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and so is comfort. This is the base proposition this project operates under; it informs both the thematic and stylistic choices, and is a crucial aspect of determining the function of the space. Here my goal is to make the case for brothel typology being inextricably linked to the aesthetic of capitalism.

The intent of my project is to create a roadside brothel-bathhouse within the bounds of the Hoover Building in London (see fig. 7), with the backdrop of transience, of moving but not necessarily progressing. And this transience was important for choosing the location. My site is located on the Western Avenue, a part of the A40, which connects Heathrow Airport with West London. A roadside location is a crucial aspect of my idea. The American roadside/

car culture was a massive turning point for capitalism in directly tying the consumer culture to our identities, and this has led to an increased difficulty of differentiating between system and self. As previously discussed, consumers are not entirely passive in the process, but their autonomy, and ability to self-actualise, extends only to the boundaries set out by the system, which in turn can create a sense of disillusionment - a quality that my space can work with in order to elicit de-alienation.

As brothels are currently illegal to operate in the UK (Section 33A, Sexual Offences Act 1956), this is a speculative project aiming to provide a safe space for sex workers, whilst avoiding the moral sanitisation of the world of prostitution. It will not attempt to hide away the reality, good or bad, of the subject matter. Instead, the project explores the idea of embracing physical and psychological discomfort as a form of resistance against the systems of oppression. By the nature of being a brothel-bathhouse, my space is one of sex and sensuality - two concepts which in themselves are a form of comfort from discomfort.

fig. 7
The Hoover Building.
Perivale, London.



Brothel Typology

We understand brothels proper to be spaces with sexual activity as the primary programme: “The interior architecture of the bordellos became themselves an immersive experience of sexual fantasy. Sex made structure” (Barbier, 2013). Although brothels have existed at least since antiquity, across the centuries sex work has often been conducted in spaces with other primary programmes. In ancient Rome, sex workers solicited and serviced clients in public spaces, like taverns, inns, or bathhouses (McGinn, 2004). Similarly, modern day sex work can take place in a variety of spaces that have other intended purposes, now also including the online and virtual spaces.*

The mode sex work takes depends on a number of factors, including a sex worker’s preference, the availability of the preferred space, and local laws limiting or encouraging one mode over another. Interviewing 109 sex workers in Ecuador, where brothels are legal, and Argentina, where they are not, Jessica Van Meir illustrates the variety in attitudes towards brothels. She notes that they are the safest spaces for sex workers, due to regulation, safety mechanisms such as panic buttons, and security personnel on site (2017, p.4). In the UK, where operating a brothel is forbidden, hotels and rental properties serve as de facto brothels, and for the users of these spaces it will be the primary (hidden) programme. This is well illustrated in the interview I conducted with

a former Chelsea Cloisters employee (2025); sex work takes place in spaces where help is hard to reach, and asking for help might harm the worker instead, by getting them removed from the premises.

As previously mentioned, the primary programme of a brothel is sexual activity, but hardly ever does a space have a singular function, and so we ought to ask: what are its secondary programmes? Looking at Parisian ‘houses of tolerance’, we can see that brothels, particularly upscale ones, provided their patrons with spaces to socialise, conduct business, eat and drink (Barbier, 2013); one could even make a point of these spaces providing an emotional or cultural experience, ie. the escapism inspired by the worldly decor, with rooms themes carefully crafted around mythology, historical periods, and ‘exotic’ cultures. Sex workers report clients often pay for their services in lieu of going to a therapist, or finding a companion. Moreover, brothels can be perceived as spaces of emotional support and shelter for the workers, they might foster a community otherwise hard to access for those at the margins of society (Van Meir, 2017).

* Venturi et al refer to the suburban middle classes - in the US most working people consider themselves middle class, and the term encompasses almost everyone who is not either very rich or desolately poor. A large portion of the American middle class would be considered part of the working class in Marxist terms.

My space's mission therefore is to subvert the current and past typologies - not a radical subversion, but a delicate one, that does not disrupt what works, only aims to improve on it. Like Parisian houses of tolerance, it is to be a purpose-built brothel with sex as the primary programme, but having other functions in the background - ie. a bathhouse as ritual space, and a motel as space of emotional refuge. It is to provide a safe environment for the workers and patrons alike, with inclusion of protective mechanisms, like panic buttons, that can mitigate harm on site. Being a space where discomfort lingers, it is to have soul, unlike modern brothels, but similarly to them emphasise hygiene standards.

Bordello and Hygiene

Brothels tend to invite connotations of seediness, filth, and destitution, but it is worth asking ourselves: is it just stigma? And of what exactly, prostitution or sex itself? Some of this is certainly due to puritan or anti-sex work attitudes, and some due to fear of venereal diseases. As Jill Harsin notes, 'the dominant image of the bordello was that of a festering wound' (Green, p.89). This fear, although rational, can stem more from preconceptions based on what we imagine a brothel to look like, than real sanitary standards. Here I find it useful to distinguish between two dominant aesthetics, the 'soulless brothel' and the 'bordello'. Crucially, both have in common a preexisting idea of disrepute, however the way it presents itself in one typology is in direct contradiction to the other.

By 'soulless brothels' I mean modern spaces in high volume, sex tourism-focused areas, for example in Amsterdam. They're characterised by often simplistic yet sleek contemporary interior design, with minimal decor such as 'atmospheric' neon lighting, and with increased focus on perceived hygiene, for example with plain bedding and easy-to-clean surfaces. By 'bordello' we should understand anything from Parisian-style brothels, to Nevada sex ranches, characterised by mismatched, gaudy, or tacky decor. Oftentimes, these sex spaces can read as seedy due to a lived-in or used appearance, and the visible passage of time.

But perceived hygiene does not always equate to actual cleanliness, and vice-versa. Le Sphinx, one of the most famous Parisian brothels, was uniquely modernist in its design and "reassuringly sterile as an operating room" (Green, p.87). However, most brothels in the 19th and 20th century Paris had weekly medical and hygiene checks to prevent the spread of syphilis. In fact, despite being perceived as 'dirty', since brothels have always existed as means of control, at least minimal sanitary standards were expected. Nonetheless, like Le Sphinx, my brothel design will "celebrate the erotics of hygiene itself" (Green, p.87) through containing a bathhouse that supports the ritual of purification.

Sanitising Sex

Similar preconceptions about hygiene surround bathhouses, where the sacred ritual of purification often became reinterpreted as a profane ritual of hygiene. Throughout history, public baths were intended as a means of getting the population clean, but crowded, not properly filtered water sources can become hotbeds for bacteria. Ancient Roman *thermae* notoriously contributed to spreading diseases and worms through large portions of the population.

Visually, there are two images of a bathhouse: the grand opulence of Turkish Baths and Roman *Thermae*, and the natural simplicity of Scandinavian Saunas and Japanese *Onsens*. This contrast between minimal and maximal spacial impression had an impact on their actual and perceived eroticism. Sex and prostitution was rampant in Roman baths, and segregated Turkish hammams became the subject of Western man's fantasy in eroticising female-only spaces. In my project, I use the visual grandeur and dilapidation of ancient bathhouses to achieve the "romantic effect" of ruin, where desire lurks within "haunted atmospheres" (Comaroff & Ker-Shing, 2023, pp.65-66). This is further drawing on my belief that contrast - material, structural, and atmospheric - is needed as a catalyst for cathartic purification of ideas.

Bathhouses can also be seen as social equalisers: "Space dissolves in steam. Distances collapse, the borders of bodies are rubbed out, and *disjecta membra* loom through

the fog." (Wilkinson, 2018) The cleansing mechanism was also intended as a theoretical anti-capitalist tool: "the revolutionary subject experienced 'proletarian mass-baptism under the mechanised heavens'" (Wilkinson, 2018). Here, the act of mass bathing works as a catalyst in a very similar way to how I seek to use discomfort as a trigger of catharsis.

fig. 8
The Indian Room in the
Chabanais.
via Galerie au Bonheur du
Jour, Paris.



Bordello and Capitalism

What bathhouses put in full sight, brothels aimed to obfuscate. Paul Teyssier saw Parisian brothels as “inverted architecture” - ordinary and inconspicuous from the outside, but elaborate, labyrinthine, and fantastical on the inside (Barbier, 2013). In other words, they were inverted ‘decorated sheds’, decorated on the inside. What Teyssier saw as playful subversion, however, can be seen as a deliberate systemic suppression of sex work.

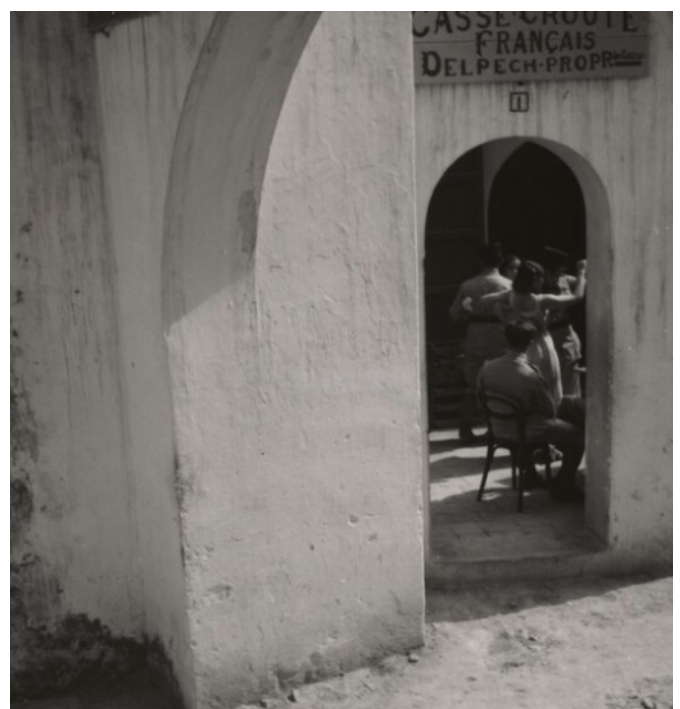
When we look all around us, we can see, in many forms, sex is advertised loudly and ostentatiously, but is simultaneously zoned out of the view - to specify, I am talking about the dichotomy between sexuality in advertising/media, and the sex act itself. I wish to stress a connection between this phenomenon and late stage capitalism with two key arguments:

1. Sex sells, but the sale of sex is seen as degenerate. Even when sold, (primarily female) bodies are viewed as commodities, and objectified as such, then discarded when no longer needed, and pushed out to societal margins.
2. Capitalist dreams have similarly been advertised in a flashy manner, but victims of the system, and the systems failures are hidden on purpose.

When it comes to avoiding zoning sex work out of the view, I do not wish to infringe on the right to privacy of the workers or clients, or to deny that sex (more often than not) requires intimacy. I simply wish to build on the concept

of a ‘trojan horse’ architecture (Comaroff & Ker-Shing, 2023, pp.101-116) with the idea of the ‘decorated shed’ - I do not want it to hide a red light district within a building complex to make it more palatable to society at large. This type of a project would read like a small-scale version of Bousbir (see fig. 9), the walled-off brothel district in Casablanca, which functioned like an open-air prison for prostitutes (Steinmetz, 2015, pp.183-185).

fig. 9
Bousbir, Casablanca, Morocco.
via Denise Bellon.



I chose the London suburban neighbourhood of Perivale not to push sex work out of the city centre, but because of the roadside location and proximity to Heathrow Airport, thus inviting an audience of those in transit. I aim for my space to loudly and unashamedly announce its function. Although I employ elements of city-within-a-city by giving the space secondary functions, my design is designed as a voluntary space, not an enclosure.

Noa Rui-Piin Weiss draws a similarity between brothel and monastery design, noting the control and confinement functions built into these spaces. She states that patriarchal constraint over bodies is particularly prevalent in buildings that facilitate or restrict sexual activity (2022). We see this in Amsterdam's red light district, where brothel workers stand behind glass windows to attract clients, their bodies a commodity akin to a product on a shelf. One might claim that an element of objectification is to be expected when the "product" is the body itself - but herein lies the issue my project addresses. Prostitution precedes capitalism by many centuries, yet there seems to be a human distinction between paying for sex as a service, and purchasing the right to a body as a commodity. In designing a new type of brothel, there is importance in emphasising autonomy over personhood, and abolishing the capitalist understanding of 'right' and 'ownership'.

Half Dead and Dying Still

To conclude, this project is not about the arguments surrounding the morality of prostitution. I believe my position on the topic to be clear from the choice of programme itself - still, to make it abundantly clear, I believe in legalised and regulated sex work, and thus also in the importance and necessity of spaces designated for sex work. Regardless of one's perspective however, the fact of the matter is: prostitution happens - it has, since the dawn of civilisation. It will continue to happen. Legal or not. It is not possible to legislate away "the oldest profession in the world" - but it is possible to legislate it badly.

This project is about giving space to those pushed to the margins of society. It is about providing a safer environment without casting judgement, all whilst aiming to reverse the notion of the body as a product with consumer rights, and instead promoting the idea of paid sex as a service, whereupon bodily autonomy remains untouched. It is an option, an alternative, not the solution. It is antithetical to a single solution. The space by design will embrace discomfort, because it is inherent to our understanding of sex work, of sex itself, of bodies and the economic system under which these bodies operate. It is inherent to our existence. The space will only be sincere if it embraces these discomforts.

Returning to the idea of soulless brothel/bordello dichotomy, the visual aspects of each archetype can influence the treatment of the

body as person or product. A sanitised space akin to a Holiday Inn room, albeit backlit red or purple, feels de-personified, and thus may lead to clients viewing sex workers as a standard mechanised part of a mass manufactured environment. My argument for the bordello archetype favours a more human approach, spatially inducing a lived-in atmosphere. The discomfort element becomes a human condition.

Using the aesthetic of what I would call 'faded Americana' (see fig. 10)- the sadness of a highway motel aesthetic past its prime, bearing the signs of unfulfilled promises of capitalism - combined and contrasted with elements of a boudoir, I lean into the discomfort of sex and system. The grandeur/ruin contrast as an aesthetic choice carries a political agenda of terminal capitalism, where discomfort of "accelerated mortality" (Comaroff & Ker-Shing, 2023, p.65) stems from a dying system, or the near-corpses of its victims, before it manages to hide them.

fig. 10
A fragment of a collage depicting faded Americana.



Katherine Lawrie Van de Ven likens motels to spaces of limbo, of emotional turmoil: “purgatory with a colour TV” (Clarke et al., 2009, p.236). I see spaces such as motels, and thus my motel-inspired brothel too, as peripherally domestic - aesthetically adjacent to a domestic setting, providing similar sense of privacy, or intimacy, yet simultaneously being only temporary waypoints.

Speaking of aesthetics, although I have heavily leaned on the ideas of the ugly and the kitschy, the overall result is not necessarily one of ugliness or cheapness, but rather, it is a celebration of the undesigned, the subjective, the dubious aesthetic valour. Put another way, the eclecticism and the stylistic mismatch of my space embraces the idea of unreal realism inspired by Americana - the absurdity of the visual abundance and the emotional emptiness.

What we as designers might consider ‘undesigned’ is simply a narrow, or short-sighted view. Instead, I argue that such interiors are designed over time, curated by life and circumstances. In a rentier economy, where for majority of the population ownership over space (and increasingly over objects within a space) is hard to come by, Baudrillard’s words ring ever more true: “domesticity is directly colonised” (1996, p.162). If we can no longer rely on the private realm to hold this function, I thus propose we see the peripherally domestic spaces (such as brothels or motels) and objects within them primarily as symbols, signs which carry memory.

Expanding on this point within the idea of unreal realism, I see my space as a collection of symbols: furnishings, lighting, fixtures, trinkets, materials, etc., all harmoniously, or disharmoniously, signifying real ideas and memories, within a total that amounts to a false reality. None of the symbols belong permanently to the users of the space, but feel like they do. This in turn elicits real feelings, but within a wholly unreal setting - a place which feels like it could exist anywhere and nowhere at once, resulting in confusion that needs to be addressed within oneself. Often the preservation or recreation of spaces, styles, and objects of the past is seen as a way of romanticising said past. I on the other hand chose to view them as a visual reality check.

fig. 11
A collage depicting what I call
unreal realism.



Bibliography

1. Barbier, L. (2013) Paris, from the boudoir: Atlas Obscura's Decadent Journey Through Belle Epoque bordellos, Atlas Obscura. Available at: <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/paris-from-the-boudoir-the-decadent-journey-in-belle-epoque-bordellos> (Accessed: 21 January 2025).
2. Baudrillard, J. (1986) America. London: Verso.
3. Baudrillard, J. (1996) The System of Objects. London: Verso.
4. Bayley, S. (1986) Sex, Drink and Fast Cars. London: Faber and Faber.
5. Chermayeff, S., Gardner, N. and Stucin, S. (2017) Eight creatives talk about the paradox of comfort, Pin-up Magazine. Available at: <https://pinupmagazine.org/articles/the-comfort-paradox-architects-artists-curators-designers-talk-about-comfort> (Accessed: 03 February 2025).
6. Clarke, D.B., Crawford Pfannhauser, V., Doel, M.A. (2009) Moving Pictures / Stopping Places. Plymouth: Lexington Books.
7. Comaroff, J., Ker-Shing, O. (2023) Horror in architecture. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
8. Deleuze, G., Guattari, F. (1977) Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
9. Didion, J. (1979) The White Album. London: 4th Estate.
10. Fisher, M. (2014) Capitalist Realism. Alresford: Zero Books.
11. Fisher, M. (2020) Postcapitalist Desire: The Final Lectures. Edited by M. Colquhoun. London: Repeater Books.
12. Gottdiener, M. (2001) The Theming of America. Oxford: Westview Press.
13. Green, G. (no date) The Modernist Brothel and the Erotics of Hygiene. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/6461978/The_Modernist_Brothel_and_the_Erotics_of_Hygiene (Accessed: 03 February 2025).
14. Jasper, A., Ngai, S. (2011) 'Our Aesthetic Categories: An Interview With Sianne Ngai', Cabinet, (43).
15. Jonas, S., Nissenson, M. (1994) Going, going, gone: Vanishing Americana. San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books.
16. Life (1971) Google Books. Available at: https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=MkAEAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA34&source=gbs_toc_r&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false (Accessed: 27 January 2025).
17. McGinn, T.A. (2004) The Economy of Prostitution in The Roman World, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
18. Morse, J.M., Bottorff, J.L. and Hutchinson, S. (1995) 'The paradox of comfort', Nursing Research, 44(1).
19. Pezeu-Massabuau, J. (2012) Philosophy of Discomfort. London: Reaktion.
20. Steinmetz, C. (2015) (Sub)Urban Sexscapes: Geographies and Regulation of the Sex Industry, Google Books. Edited by P. Maginn. Available at: https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=GvnDBAAQBAJ&pg=PA185&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false (Accessed: 30 January 2025).
21. Van Meir, J. (2017) 'Sex work and the Politics of Space: Case Studies of Sex Workers in Argentina and Ecuador', Social Sciences, 6(2).
22. Venturi, R., Scott Brown, D., Izenour, S. (1972) Learning from Las Vegas. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
23. Weiss, N.R.P. (2022) Monasteries and brothels: Architectures of Control, Curationist. Available at: <https://www.curationist.org/editorial-features/article/monasteries-and-brothels:-architectures-of-control> (Accessed: 05 February 2025).
24. Wilkinson, T. (2018) Typology: Bathhouse, The Architectural Review. Available at: <https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/typology/typology-bathhouse> (Accessed: 04 February 2025).

Image List

Fig. 1 Own work.

Fig. 2 <https://fineartamerica.com/featured/1970s-1980s-the-strip-las-vegas-daytime-vintage-images.html>

Fig. 3 https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Big_Duck.JPG

Fig. 4 <https://www.reviewjournal.com/business/casinos-gaming/caesars-palace-to-demolish-rotunda-along-strip-2744187/>

Fig. 5-6 <https://www.francescoaglieri.com/>

Fig. 7 Own photography.

Fig. 8 <https://www.spiegel.de/fotostrecke/historische-bordelle-fotostrecke-107319.html>

Fig. 9 <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.164405.html>

Fig. 10-11 Own work.