Dr Penelope Haralambidou
Senior Lecturer
Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL

https://issuu.com/aaschool/docs/aarchitecture33

Eroticism, Architecture and the Desire to Grasp the World Visually in the Work of Marcel Duchamp

While much has been written on Marcel Duchamp – one of the twentieth century’s most beguiling artists – the subject of his flirtation with architecture seems to have been largely overlooked. Yet, in the carefully arranged plans and sections organising the blueprint of desire in the Large Glass, his numerous pieces replicating architectural fragments, and his involvement in designing exhibitions, Duchamp’s fascination with architectural design is clearly evident. As his unconventional architectural influences – Jean-François Nicerc, Jean-Jacques Lequeu and Frederick Kiesler – and diverse legacy – Bernard Tschumi, OMA, Michael Webb, Diller + Scofidio and Ben Nicholson – indicate, Duchamp was not as much interested in ‘built’ architecture as he was in the architecture of desire, re-constructing the imagination through drawing and testing the boundaries between reality and its aesthetic and philosophical possibilities.

My book Marcel Duchamp and the Architecture of Desire examines the link between architectural thinking and Duchamp’s work.¹ By employing design, drawing and making - the tools of the architect – I perform an architectural analysis of Duchamp’s final enigmatic work Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas..., 1946–66, demonstrating an innovative research methodology able to grasp meaning beyond textual analysis. This novel reading of his ideas and methods adds to, but also challenges, other art-historical interpretations. Through three main themes – allegory, visuality and desire – my work performs, defines and theorises an alternative drawing practice positioned between art and architecture that predates and includes Duchamp.

In the following two excerpts, I discuss Duchamp’s use of eroticism and my definition of the term ‘architecture of desire’.² The excerpts are accompanied by a series of drawings, spanning the long duration of my practice-led research on Duchamp, with the most recent dating from earlier this year.³

Architecture of Desire

I believe in eroticism a lot, because it is truly a rather widespread thing throughout the world, a thing that everyone understands. It replaces, if you wish, what other literary schools call Symbolism, Romanticism. It could be another ‘ism’, so to speak.⁴
In his interviews with French art critic Pierre Cabanne, Duchamp often states the importance of eroticism in his work: everyone understands it without speaking of it, which means that it is possible to address issues through eroticism that often remain hidden.\textsuperscript{5} Indisputably, Duchamp’s use of eroticism and double-entendres has added to the notoriety of his works and their impact on twentieth-century art.\textsuperscript{6}

However, French linguist and art historian Marc Décimo suggests that although Duchamp often spoke about ‘eroticism’, the term remained ‘a vague notion that Duchamp never defined’. In his introduction to the edited anthology, Marcel Duchamp and Eroticism, Décimo understands Duchamp’s undefined eroticism as ‘dynamic thought that adapts and creates’ or ‘the very instant when the “click” takes place, the rendezvous, the moment when our vision changes and approaches what is there, before our eyes, in a new way’.\textsuperscript{7}

Duchamp’s work provides an opportunity to focus on the infinitely erotic-dynamic functioning of thought, on its physiology; which consists in appreciating, through the intervention of the eye, what lies beyond the screen of memory and prejudice and being filled with wonder by the much more meaningful shadowy side, illuminated by the seduction of a revealed truth. If only we take the trouble to look.\textsuperscript{8}

This luck of definition of eroticism by Duchamp led to many different interpretations. For instance in ‘Duchamp’s Eroticism: A Mathematical Analysis’ American art historian Craig Adcock poignantly observes that Duchamp’s eroticism can be linked with his interest in ideas concerning four-dimensional geometry and more specifically the work of French mathematician Esprit Pascal Jouffret. He compares the new geometrical principles, including the notions of reversal and expansion, with examples of Duchamp’s works, for instance his gender reversals in Rrose Sélavy and \textit{L.H.O.O.Q}, the topological rotations of his ‘readymades’ and what he calls his ‘geometrical’ nudes in the \textit{Large Glass} and \textit{Given}.\textsuperscript{9} Adcock argues that, beyond its role in seducing the viewer, eroticism informed by mathematics and geometry becomes a method for philosophical and scientific pursuit. He concludes:

\begin{quote}
  The eroticism … is first funny and then ironic and then epistemic. Duchamp’s bizarre erotic games are intermeshed with other systems of thought, with mathematics and epistemology, and at those levels they are profound.\textsuperscript{10}
\end{quote}

But even if Duchamp’s eroticism is connected with four-dimensional geometry and an expanded visuality, how does it relate with architecture?

Eroticism in Duchamp’s work is primarily connected with the architecture of the gaze, and both the \textit{Large Glass} and \textit{Given} are ‘Bachelor’ machines for looking at the coveted image of an unattainable ‘Bride’.\textsuperscript{11} Duchamp arranges the constituent parts of these optical machines to form complex spatial constructs. Moreover, he uses architectural drawing conventions to describe the lower part of the \textit{Large Glass} – plotting the Bachelors’ domain from a plan and a section – and directly using architectural elements – the door and wall in \textit{Given}. 
In ‘Surreal House’, 2010, an exhibition exploring Surrealism in architecture, two works by Duchamp were the first pieces introducing the main theme of desire at the gallery entrance. In her introductory text to the exhibition catalogue, curator Jane Alison points out: ‘We can say with some certainty … that eroticism and architecture were the mainstays of Duchamp’s decidedly non-retinal practice.’

In his article entitled ‘Architecture and Its Double’ for the special Architectural Design issue on ‘Surrealism and Architecture’ assembled by Czech architectural theorist Dalibor Vesely in 1978, French architect Bernard Tschumi discusses Duchamp’s Given as a ‘space of desire’. He observes Duchamp’s ‘antiretinal’ choice of ‘mechanical drawing’ for the Large Glass, while he sees Given as the culmination of Duchamp’s fascination with erotic machines. Describing the relationship of the viewer with Duchamp’s new assemblage, he refers to a space ‘of tension, of empathy, of desire’. For Tschumi the implicit, allegorical erotic content in the Large Glass becomes explicit in Given, but at the same time the nude figure is just a signifier of any erotic exchange between object and viewer, or even between idea and object.

In Built upon Love: Architectural Longing after Ethics and Aesthetics, 2006, Alberto Pérez Gómez uncovers the relationship between love and architecture. He divides love into eros, relating to erotic desire, seduction and poetics; and philia, relating to friendship and ethics. Speaking of his Polyphilo or The Dark Forest Revisited, 1992, he asserts that ‘to the primary reality of embodied consciousness, architecture speaks in the medium of the erotic, as poetic image’. Discussing Duchamp’s Given as part of the architectural poetic image in modernity, he suggests that the space between the observer and the nude ‘is tense and unbridgeable and yet ... it is a space of participation’. In the Large Glass and Given, ‘the space of participation is activated through eros’.

Thus the term ‘architecture of desire’ in the title of my book, Marcel Duchamp and the Architecture of Desire, refers to Duchamp’s Given, which is the primary focus and subject matter of my research. In harmony with the views by Alison, Tschumi and Pérez Gómez, I too perceive the piece as a space pointing to the erotic potential in architecture.

Secret during his lifetime – but as is widely known today – the model for the nude figure in Given was Duchamp’s lover, Brazilian sculptress Maria Martins. Given, therefore, is literally the structure Duchamp designed and physically constructed to house Martin’s coveted image on the verge of losing her: the architecture of ‘his’ desire.

**Drawing out Desire**

Beyond simply signifying Given, however, I see the term ‘architecture of desire’ connected with the mechanics of technical drawing in architecture and its ironic appropriation by Duchamp.
Drawing in architecture is in anticipation of the thing it describes: the construction of the building. The lack of the projected object, the future building, which is missing at the time of the act of drawing, is a source of an imbedded desire in the process of design.

Training in architectural design promotes the development of a sophisticated spatial imagination capable of grasping complex three-dimensional configurations intellectually. The consummation of this intense imagination, however, is disproportionately slow. Unlike art, where the drawing is single, immediate, and an art object in itself – therefore, offering the potential for instant pleasure – in architecture, the object referred to by the drawing is ‘delayed’.

Architectural design, therefore, involves a suspension of pleasure that produces desire. I suggest, however, that desire exists in the execution and appreciation of architectural drawing, irrespective of the building. The pleasure derives from the close ‘reading’ of drawings, combining information from the plan and the section, which leads to the blossoming of the designed structure in the mind. As a result there is no need for the delayed existence of a physical spatial structure to produce desire in architectural design. Perhaps a stronger desire can be locked into speculative and ‘surreal’ drawn projects that are never intended to be built.

In Architecture’s Desire: Reading the Late Avant-garde, American architectural historian and theorist K. Michael Hays examines architecture as a way of ‘negotiating the real’ and as a ‘socially symbolic production whose primary task is the construction of concepts and subject positions rather than the making of things’. He discusses French architect Bernard Tschumi’s Advertisements for Architecture, 1975–76, a series of postcard-sized montages of disparate images accompanied by text as a ‘notational device to “trigger” the desire for architecture’. According to Hays, Tschumi attempts to establish an architectural notation that ‘is not secondary to some building it denotes (as are conventional architectural drawings)’ but still contains ‘a gap – a desire that must be performed by each reader of these works’. In one of his Advertisements for Architecture Tschumi discusses another type of desire deriving from architectural drawing:

Ropes and rules. The most excessive passion always involves a set of rules. Look at it this way: The game of architecture is an intricate play with rules that you may break or accept. These rules, like so many knots that cannot be untied, have the erotic significance of bondage: the more numerous and sophisticated the restraints, the greater the pleasure.

So for Tschumi, architecture and architectural drawing involves an appreciation of the pleasure of rules, geometry and order, compounded by a compulsive desire for their ‘irrational’ excess and dissolution. He suggests that ‘the ultimate pleasure of architecture lies in the most forbidden parts of the architectural act; where limits are perverted and prohibitions transgressed’. He stresses, however, that this not a purely nihilistic or subversive stance – ‘we are not dealing with destruction here, but with excess, differences, and left-
overs’ – but a creative position to secure the preservation of the ‘erotic capacity of architecture’.22

This love of rules, combined with a compulsive desire to break or exceed them, is not a characteristic of all architectural drawings; it is, however, a trait that links all the work presented in Marcel Duchamp and the Architecture of Desire. Architectural drawing, irreversibly disengaged from building and employed for seduction, construction of allegorical narratives, or for interrogating the limits of visual representation, is paradigmatic of: Duchamp’s artistic pursuit; my empathetic review of his work in search of hidden dimensions; as well as my selection of his influences and legacy in architecture. Duchamp’s work is exemplary of the paradox of constructing rules combined with a desire to break them. His oeuvre includes meticulous and precisely drawn compositions, as in the Large Glass and Given, as well as audacious and ironical attacks of the rule systems in art, for instance in his readymades.23

These attacks seek to contest not only the underlying syntax of accepted norms in the production of art, but also challenge the foundation of his own taste and artistic language by using chance as a method and purposely reinventing his modus operandi.

My research, into what I see as Duchamp’s appropriation, but also transgression of architectural drawing practice, also originates in a personal quest to review and transgress the underlying syntax of architectural representation.

Frustrated by the fact that even in its contemporary digital phase architectural drawing relies on orthographic projection and a Cartesian understanding of homogeneous space, I seek to unravel its foundation. This Cartesian schema is closely connected to the ‘invention’ of perspective construction during the Renaissance, which in turn derives from a monocular understanding of vision. French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard in his Les transformateurs Duchamp (Duchamp’s Trans/formers), 1977, sees Given as an incarnation – a fleshing out on an architectural scale – of the system of Renaissance perspective, while at the same time ‘maliciously at work to lay bare that system’s hidden assumptions’.24

Inspired by Lyotard’s analysis – including his expounding sketch of Given’s interior – my research examines Duchamp’s work as an inversion or expansion of the rules of linear perspective in search of an alternative understanding of visual space.25 To develop this expanded perspective, I draw on Duchamp’s term ‘blossoming’, which describes the Bride’s desire, but can also be linked to Duchamp’s fascination with non-Euclidean geometries and stereoscopy. Stereoscopy, a popular illusory technique infamously linked to pornography, transgresses perspective by isolating and revealing binocular depth and allowing an image to ‘blossom’ in space. My analysis of Given identifies stereoscopy as its central and intentional theme, influencing its intellectual content and guiding its manufacturing process. Consequently, I read Duchamp’s inversion or expansion of perspective in Given as a physically constructed stereoscopic drawing, attempting to unlock the erotic potential of architectural representation, what I have called a ‘blossoming of perspective’.
Transgression and excess of architectural drawing conventions links all the practitioners I present in the concluding chapter entitled ‘Defrocked Cartesians’, where I attempt to formulate Duchamp’s influences and legacy in architectural design. Jean-François Niceron exceeds perspective through anamorphosis, Jean-Jacques Lequeu transgresses the boundaries of decency in architectural representation through excessive eroticism, while Frederick Kiesler denounces drawing on a flat plane and builds the model of the endless house as an extension of the body. Conversely, Michael Webb devises drawing techniques to picture the imperceptible nature of memory and Nat Chard constructs meticulous drawing machines that violate their own structure in their mission to capture indeterminacy. Entirely atypical, they all exceed the primary role of architectural drawing as geometric instructions to build and employ it as an investigatory tool in a sometimes refreshingly indulgent, philosophical pursuit.

In Marcel Duchamp and the Architecture of Desire architectural drawing is both the subject matter and the method. Although ‘written’, most concepts and discoveries in the book originated as drawings: large ambitious final drawings; three-dimensional drawings and models; collages; animated drawings; stereoscopic drawings; sketches in loose pages and sketchbooks that I keep safe; perishable sketches now lost; but also ephemeral drawing-like ideas forming in the mind which are difficult to fully translate into either physical drawings or words. Furthermore, I use drawing as a method not only of developing new ideas but also of closely ‘reading’ other drawings.

The Locus of Desire

A question I often receive, when presenting my work on Given and my analysis of Duchamp’s construction of the nude, concerns my stance towards the pornographic subject matter of the assemblage, which is often perceived as shocking and distasteful, if not offensive.

Furthermore, although inspired by Duchamp’s work, my drawings although portraying desire could not be seen as conveying the same ‘eroticism’ and by being deliberately non-figurative, my reworking of Given in The Act of Looking eliminates the pornographic iconography. As a female viewer, critic and architectural analyst, how do I negotiate entering a construct representing an apparent male desire? Is my resistance to addressing the explicit subject matter of Given a repression?

My position is that I read Given primarily as a meticulous drawing of an alternative desirous way of looking.

My recollection of the first encounter with the photographic representation of the scene behind the doors in Given is vague and, by the time I visited the installation at the Philadelphia Museum of Art for the first time, I did not perceive the scene shocking. If anything, I found its expansion in three dimensions and the near blinding brightness of the internal lighting nothing short of transcendent.
Prompted by the careful and detailed explanation of its construction in his *Manual of Instructions*, I had already developed a way of looking at Duchamp’s assemblage as a deliberate exposition of the act of looking, a staging of the visual process. Furthermore, I saw the combination of *Given* and the document of the *Manual* as Duchamp’s attempt to create a built treatise in spatial perception, concealed behind the provocative and titillating subject matter. In deliberate opposition to sensationalist reviews of the work – some have seen it as the scene of a violent crime, for instance – I was determined to bypass the overt lurid subject matter, in order to unveil the hidden structure of this ‘architecture of desire’.

Thus, I perceive the pornographic *mise en scène* of the work ‘allegorically’: as subterfuge – dazzling the viewer away from the clandestine significance of *Given* – but also, as allusion – pornography as a signifier for stereoscopy, the work’s underlying theme and a representation technique which during Duchamp’s early life became infamously connected with the presentation of lewd subject matter.

Duchamp states in his notes for the *Large Glass* that there are two appearances of the Bride, one by the Bachelors and another by the Bride imagining herself naked. I am not alone in arguing that although portraying a female nude, the scene in *Given* cannot be simply identified as a construction from a solely male point of view. The direction of the nude’s gaze is inaccessible as her head is hidden behind the edge of the breach on the wall, but as Thierry de Duve has suggested this creates a strange topology for the viewer. When looking through the peepholes on the door, it is as if her gaze goes around and traps you from behind. The viewer is caught within the space created by the Bride looking at herself: within a female gaze.

Furthermore, *Given*’s immediacy and lyrical beauty, as well as perhaps its covert violence, has a potentially female origin, influenced by Duchamp’s lover, Maria Martins, a woman with an allegedly predatory sexuality. Martins’ temperament is evident in her sculptural work, which as curator Michael R. Taylor observes, in the 1940s became ‘animated with a writhing, baroque exuberance that accentuated her themes of fertility, desire and sexual cruelty’. Describing some of Martins’ sculptures, Taylor often refers to them as ‘terrifying’. Combining the darker sides of surrealist imagery and her native Brazilian culture – especially the myths and legends of the Amazon River – the snake goddess in her *Cobra Grande*, 1942, has ‘the cruelty of a monster and the sweetness of wild fruit’, according to Martins. Furthermore, Taylor sees her work *The Impossible III*, 1946 – depicting a male and female figure caught in a deadlock of desire and repulsion and using sexual imagery relating to predatory animal and plant forms – as a direct reference to her relationship with Duchamp. If the *Large Glass* is a portrayal of the amorous exchange between the Bride and the Bachelors from the Bachelors’ technologist point of view in perspective, then *Given* is the portrayal of the same exchange, this time in stereoscopy from the point of view of the Bride: Maria.
As we have seen, Duchamp’s concept of eroticism was a central driving force guiding many of his projects; he saw it as an underlying philosophy, a matrix, but also as a material like a ‘tube of paint, so to speak’. Here Duchamp’s definition of eroticism resonates with Australian philosopher Elizabeth Grosz’s definition of the creative impulse as a sublimation of sexual selection and seduction.

His work has often been criticized by feminist critics, but American art historian and feminist Amelia Jones reconstructs Duchamp as an ‘indeterminably gendered author’ negotiating contradictory notions of sexual difference and subjectivity. For instance, in an attempt to blur gendered boundaries, he famously adopted a female creative persona Rrose Sélavy. Jones poignantly also discusses Duchamp’s methods of seduction, on a personal level during his life, as well as the continuing allure that his work affects on viewers and critics alike until today. She sees Duchamp as ‘the quintessential desired object but also the actively titillating subject who animates the field of discourse around his life and work’.

My long, unwavering preoccupation with his methods and ideas is an undeniable testimony of being under his spell: I am clearly a victim of Duchamp’s powerful charm. However, most seductive I find his proposing of creativity as the architecture of a love affair, an internal game of seduction. In this game, the author oscillates between two roles: the seducer and the seduced, the Bachelor and the Bride, the artist and the viewer/spectator, or voyeur. Requiring a constructed notion of innocence – of not knowing or an enigma – this internal game of seduction can take the author turned viewer and vice versa by surprise.

Given’s enigma invites diverse interpretations, and each interpretation reveals more about the interpreter/spectator, rather than about Duchamp’s actual intentions. I believe that his work operates in a similar way to a mathematical equation, as a robust structure of variables and constants, able to render different but consistently plausible results for each viewer/analyst/voyeur. Throughout my study, my interpretation of Given remains more or less the same: I see it as an irreducibly fascinating drawing representing the desire to grasp the world visually. In Marcel Duchamp and the Architecture of Desire I describe, from an autobiographical point of view, how this ‘architecture of desire’ has the ability to mould itself into different types of longing: from sexual desire to maternal love and to a nostalgia for the shattered locus of female creativity. Always at the back of my mind, Given still keeps its secrets, while retaining its potential to take me completely by surprise.

2 The first reworked excerpt is from the introduction and the second is found in ‘Desire: Female Nude Drawing’, see Haralambidou, Architecture of Desire, 8–14 and 229–30.
3 Before the Looking Door, digital projection on skin, 2017, is a ‘drawing’ I created specifically for the Canadian journal Public, issue 56, entitled Attendant A to Z,
9 Duchamp’s readymades are ordinary manufactured objects that the artist selected and modified, as an antidote to what he called ‘retinal art’.
11 For more on Duchamp, architecture and desire, see Penelope Haralambidou, ‘On the Architecture of Looking’, an interview by Victoria Watson, filmed by Mobile Studio, when I discuss the devices that structure our experience of Duchamp’s Given. The film was presented at ‘The Fractured Body: The House as Body’, an evening event organized and curated by Mobile Studio as part of The Surreal House exhibition at Barbican Art Gallery, 2010.
15 Pérez-Gómez, Built upon Love, 103–4.
16 ‘Delay’ or ‘retard’ in French is a term that Duchamp uses to describe his Large Glass: ‘verre en retard’ or ‘delay in glass’.
18 Hays, Architecture’s Desire, 145.
19 Bernard Tschumi, Advertisements for Architecture.
23 Molly Nesbit analyses the significance of Duchamp’s training in mechanical drawing in Molly Nesbit, Their Common Sense (London: Black Dog, 1999).
24 Jean-François Lyotard, Duchamp’s TRANSformers, trans. Ian McLeod (Venice, CA: Lapis, 1990) and quoted in Rosalind Krauss, The Optical Unconscious


33 In addition to a short analysis of her work, Taylor gives a detailed account of her alleged relationship with the sculptor and her teacher Jacques Lipchitz prior to Duchamp. See Taylor, Marcel Duchamp: Étant donnés, 26–32.

34 Taylor, Marcel Duchamp: Étant donnés, 30.

35 Taylor, Marcel Duchamp: Étant donnés, 29.


For the published version see: https://issuu.com/aaschool/docs/aarchitecture33