Hypersexual translations- the strip club becomes public

An excess of sexualised images increasingly dominates the public space of the city. The aesthetics from the widely circulated sex industry materialize in central business districts in the form of digital media and advertising (Figure 1) and, while the presence of the sexualised image is not entirely new, its proliferation is a warning. Of course the body as a site for economic exchange is neither new nor surprising - nor is the ever-shifting territory of what constitutes ‘public’. What has changed for both sexuality and publicness is the relationship between urban form and the contemporary media. Furthermore, the sexualised events of urban life - once contained and controlled in interior spaces - are now moving into and onto the public realm. This is the hypersexual condition. Through the examination of two case studies this paper will demonstrate the proposition that - in becoming public - hypersexual urbanism (and it’s architectural accomplice) is now a vehicle for legitimizing the ongoing subordination and systems of violence towards women. These case studies will focus on the deployment of visual apparatus from the sex industry in two very different scenarios: Firstly, a translation from the strip club ‘stage’ to the suburban car wash and, secondly, a translation from the stripper’s ‘pole’ to the urban recreational park. Both examples articulate the strip club becoming public.

Figure 1: Collins Street, Melbourne Central. The shop front and advertisement in the urban interior mall. Image: Author

Women’s self-identification with raunch culture (Levi 2005, 30) and the legitimacy that they claim to embody in their desire to be desired has become a social instrument of power that is reinforced and facilitated by the contemporary media. This hypersexual femininity that characterizes a ‘post-feminist’ world manufactures a new female sexuality that is extended by advertising and presented as ‘powerful and playful’ (Whitehead and Kurz 2009, 224). This paper takes the position that the larger socio-cultural issues of hypersexuality create an
ideological problem: they support further subjugation of women and that the effects of sexualised practices becoming public have implications for all women (Jeffreys 2008, 154). The raunch culture phenomenon - as identified by feminist cultural theorists in the 1990s - has charted women's over-identification with images and activities from pornography and prostitution with the aim of illuminating the complex power relations and gendered heteronormative culture. My research investigates the gap in the current discourse on the material impact of hypersexual culture on public space and includes a repositioning of the contemporary media and architecture as a co-constituted realm with the power to continually feed the ongoing oppression of women (Butler 1993, 34).

From the inside

On any given day the strip clubs in the central business district of Melbourne have a united capacity of 4025 (Kaila and Hurley 2012). There are six legal strip clubs that line the King Street and Lonsdale Street junction: The Men’s Gallery, Goldfingers, Teezz Lounge & Dallas Showgirls, Centrefold Lounge, Showgirls Bar 20 and Spearmint Rhino. There are very few restriction placed on the clubs - the strictest being the ‘No Alcohol’ rule on Anzac Day between 7am and 12 noon. Phew.

The impact of associated violence from the strip club industry is well documented. In local council minutes and the press media the examples of raunch culture’s seepage into the public realm abound (Kaila and Hurley 2012). It is a precinct that ignites violent episodes in the public spaces where the physical violence of intoxicated, heterosexual males is performed in the laneways and the on footpaths often spilling dangerously onto the road and incoming traffic.

‘On the street and in the world I am always constituted by other, so that my self-styled gender may well find itself in comic or even tragic opposition to the gender that others see me through and with’. (Butler and Salih 2004, 35)

What occurs in the distance between the interior spaces of the club and the exterior street? Judith Butler would suggest that various kinds of sexual identities are being rehearsed and reiterated (Butler 1993, 34). On the inside a mounting and unfathomable violence is directed at the women by customers ‘trained in the commercial sexual use of women’ (Jeffreys 2008, 152). On the outside, without constraint, the violence is conceptually unhinged and directly impacts on the ongoing and iterative construction of gender.

There are four enormous city blocks commandeered by the strip club’s of King Street. Without doubt ‘women who are not in the sex industry are likely to feel excluded from these spaces. While men may take for granted their right to access public space freely, women have always suffered a reduction in this right because of male violence and its threat’ (Jeffreys 2008, 165).

Hypersexual apparatus

There is an increasing presence of raunch culture ‘coupling’ with previously unsexualised activities to produce hypersexual space. Some common examples would include - the prostituted, sex worker aesthetics in the hybrids of the parking inspector now ‘Metermaid’ or the waitress from a sexualised restaurant chain now ‘busty’ staff at Hooter’s restaurant.
In this paper I am interested in urban examples of hypersexual culture and offer two manifestations of the urban/raunch coupling: a bikini car wash (*Kitten’s Car Wash*) and an urban pole dancing (*Pole Dance, P.S.1*). In both of these examples it is the apparatus of the strip club that signals clear, visual cues to the general public and thus contribute to the *reiterated* and *citational* (*Butler 1993, 2*) gender-typing of heterosexual women and men.

Both of these case studies indicate the mainstreaming of stripping and the social acceptance of strip clubs and sexual precincts. Undoubtedly, it is difficult to separate stripping from other ways women are prostituted and this paper supports that feminist critique that understands stripping as integral to the larger system of prostitution that forms part of the organised industry that profits from sexual violence (*Stark and Whisnant 2004, 40*). As *Kurz and Whitehead* state: ‘One could suggest that the performance of a pole dance in the context of a *strip club* could be conceptualized as a form of pornography, that is, as something being solely intended to arouse sexual interest’ (*Whitehead and Kutz 2009, 227*).

Of course part of my interest here is what is changed in the translation from club to public realm?

The strip club becoming public requires an examination of the architectural apparatus in order to evidence the comparison and collusion of the translation of the strip club into the public realm and thus it’s *becoming* public.

The strip club entry, for example, has a variety of relationships to the street and façade that - unlike a brothel that honed discretion- uses evocative signatures to signal an address to the street. Upon entry the interior space of the strip club might include a general admission area with one main performance stage (sometimes combined to enclose the bar) with multiple poles used by the prostituted women to perform spins and inversions. For the majority of clubs the main stage is the central feature of the planning and the design most likely is a variation on traditional staging techniques. Premium lounges and smaller ‘satellite’ performance spaces are used for private shows and allow more ‘access’ to the stripper. Most clubs have virtual screens linked to the restricted areas - for example - a live feed into the backstage dressing room where patrons can glimpse the prostituted women relaxing and preparing for their routines. In some cases off-site access enables the website user to interact live with dancers at the club. The high-end spaces in the strip club are referred to as the ‘Champagne Room’ or VIP area and are adjacent to the main stage for enhanced visual connection. These spaces are usually more opulent than the general areas and have a private bar, lounge area, showers and ‘wet play’ areas. A range of security systems manages the strip club - from the low-tech arrangements of a bouncer and doormen through to emergency buttons for at-risk situations for employees.

The design aspects of the strip club described here are understood as the apparatus and material infrastructure for the sexualised practices of stripping. These devices, along with the behaviors of both the stripper and the customer (and the social and political system in which they exist) coalesce to form the strip club.

**Club to car**

*Kittens Car Wash* in a southeastern suburb of Melbourne is a key example of the everyday effect of raunch culture on public space. The carwash is an armature of a larger metropolitan “gentleman’s club” – *Kittens* - that host a chain of stripping and lap dancing.
venues. On the busy corner of Warrigal and North road the car wash is surrounded by prosaic, endless suburbia and has been in business since 2006. A few waves of local opposition have been settled and the car wash functions in a mostly mundane fashion.

*Kitten’s* exposes a dual phenomenon of the strip club becoming public: Firstly, the site acts a ‘stage’ and demonstrates the sexualisation of activities formerly unsexualised whereby the car wash is now a site for a sexual experience. A *Kitten* employee stands-by in a G-string bikini and is more or less ‘on stage’ with her body a necessary element in the raunch formula (Figure 2). A banana lounge and a few balloons litter the site. A large vacuum cleaner is a prop to evidence that the ‘*Kitten*’ is equipped to clean a car, if needed. The site of car wash is coupled with the strip club and becomes a legitimised hypersexual leisure activity.

Secondly, the site serves as a ‘live billboard’ where a permanent advertisement for the associated strip clubs is visible and (mostly) enacted week in, week out. The sign - like the strip club - is the initial urban address. In this case, a stylized pink cat is formed with a heart shaped centre, the cliché logo is a branding device and media presence where a virtual connection leads to the other incarnations of the business- notably the three strip clubs.

Figure 2: *Kitten’s* Carwash, view from the car, 2010. Image: Author

Like most aspects of an industry that benefits from the exploitation of women the issue is ‘amplified and extended by contemporary technologies of mass communication’ (Stark and Whisnant 2004, xiv). For example, the advertising from the carwash leads directly to either the *Kitten’s* website (via the advertised web address) or to the signage which neatly associates the carwash to the *Kitten’s* strip clubs. Online the sexualised images of dancers in the interior spaces of the various *Kitten* clubs appear along side the offers of a ‘virtual stag tour’, links to previous events and shows, information about the *Kitten’s* stripping classes (no doubt an avenue to recruit and perpetuate ‘hypersexual empowerment’), as well as login’s to discrete club membership links and services. Ads to larger sites for sexualised markets trim the page and are laced with further advertising that inevitably leads to more explicit forms of pornography that rely on the exploitation of prostituted women (Figure 3).
The stage/billboard of the *Kitten’s* site makes the passing public an involuntary participant and witness to the deployment of the strip club apparatus. The enduring body of the prostituted woman and the accumulative effect and normalization of the car wash perpetuate larger infrastructures of sexual exploitation and stereotypes. And, while it may be extreme to suggest that upon viewing the *Kittens Car Wash* women are running off to become strippers or find work as bikini clad cleaners or, alternatively, that heterosexual men are partaking in the economy of prostituted women, what must be acknowledged is that the longevity and acceptance of the urban phenomena of *Kitten’s* legitimize women in such oppressive and violated roles.

**Figure 3: Diagram of the cascade of urban hypersexuality, 2011. Diagram: Author.**

Media city

Is the modern city is more publicly sexualised than any other moment in history? Certainly sexuality has always been a significant contribution to urban life. Hypersexual culture is framed as problematic because of a central conjecture of ‘publicness’. That is to say - it is the perception of sexualised practices moving from the private realm to the public realm that underpins hypersexual discourse. Core questions of privacy have continued into the twentieth century - reinvigorated by the media technologies of surveillance and virtual space. The concerns of ‘concealment and seclusion’ (Peterman 1993, 218) and unwanted intrusion highlighted in Larry Peterman’s essay *Background’s Privacy* discusses the intrusion of political authorities into the home and family and argues that a contemporary ‘publicness’ is not new (Peterman 1993, 218).

What is certainly changed is the means for making the public realm and, in turn, the power
of the city to materialize gender stereotypes. The media-machine of the car wash highlights the contemporary city’s emphasis on the consumption of sexuality as well as it’s collusion with urban life. As Scott Mcquire states:

Rather than treating media as something separate from the city- the medium which represents urban phenomena by turning it into an image- I argue that the spatial experience of modern social life emerges through a complex process of co-constitution between architectural structures and urban territories, social practices and media feedback. (Mcquire 2008, vii)

By suggesting that architecture, media and the city are no longer separate Scott Mcquire is proposing a radical shift in architectural urbanism: Architecture is intertwined with media where the formation and structure of urban events is determined equally and reciprocally by advertising and architecture, screen and infrastructure, networks and community.

The co-constitution of media and architecture is the primary infrastructure for the delivery of the raunch aesthetic in public space. It is the framework in which women iteratively perform gender stereotypes and where they are ‘rewarded’ for adopting hypersexual culture. In the co-constitution of architecture and media the desire for desirability makes sex a currency and leads to women’s perception of power via their over-identification with hypersexualisation. Here, sex is not a static description of what one is but a norm by which one becomes viable (Butler 1993, 2).

Pole to park

Pole dancing originated in Vancouver during the 1970’s and 80’s and is considered an extension of exotic dancing with the pole introduced as a prop on which to perform tricks and spins. Popular culture has documented pole dancing’s transition from a sexually orientated activity to one that is marketed as a recreation and aerobic exercise with a discourse of liberation and empowerment. Nevertheless- ‘pole dancing per se positions the female body (at least ideologically) as a sexual commodity to be viewed and consumed, most traditionally by men’ (Whitehead and Kurz 2009, 227).

In 2010 the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York commissioned the architecture practices Solid Objectives to install the piece titled Pole Dance (Figure 4) in the acquired vacated school site - P.S.1. The work consisted of a 5-metre grid of 10-metre tall poles connected by elasticized bungee cords and an open net. The balls were employed as an aesthetic that the architect claimed gave a sense of “a game” to the work. A sand pit and play pool also highlighted this intent. The poled grid contained hammocks, pulls and rain collectors – described as ‘leverage points’ to interface between visitor and installation system. When on site one small action transforms into ripple fully across the larger system and contributes to the additional sound installation and interactive iphone app allowing visitors to effect the accompanying tonal sound environment.

One can only assume that the commissioning and installation of the Solid Objectives piece in 2010 signals one thing: that pole dancing is now so ritualized as a leisure activity that it can slide into the art gallery and public park. The architects describe the project as ‘an exploration of sensorial charged environments’ and state that they responded to a brief via the ‘choreography of situations rather than object making’. They say:
How liberating is it to be an architect these days. Never have the dominant systems been so frail. If one can steer clear of crashing debris of hubris, there is a daunting space dawning to be explored. As we free ourselves from the fascination of the finite, we can start to capture the elastic cloud that our habitation of this planet has become. It was our naïve hope to capture this gigantic cloud of human and environmental turmoil into a walled off little triangle in Long Island City. New ecologies, economies, energies, flows, fantasies, nothing is grounded anymore, footloose we bounce around on a network of intersections and knots. The limbs need flexing (Dezeen 2010).

The architectural photography of the work (Figure 4) clearly shows the use of the poles as exotic dancing mechanism- the performer is present and ready. The designers have engaged various ‘tools’ that leave no doubt about the aesthetic intention of the work. There is a deliberate use apparatus of the sex industry - for example - the pole, the wet-play areas and the use of distributed stages can be paralleled with the apparatus described in strip club.

Figure 4: Solid Objectives Pole Dance, 2010. Image: Courtesy of the Architect - SO-IL.

The collision of pole dancing and a park-like environment with a sense of ‘play’ is a key element of the construction of the hypersexuality. Playful sexuality is represented to women as powerful (and is particularly seen in advertising) where this particular view opposes tradition representations of oppressed women as ‘a passive or victimized object of the male gaze’ (Whitehead and Kurz 2009, 224). There is a tendency (in this careful trick) to conceptualise the various choices of women who participate in Raunch Culture as empowering, autonomous and liberating. And in doing so requesting that these views and decisions be respected rather than problematised. This raises questions about the ongoing negotiation of power between both men and women - a negotiation that occurs ‘within’ and that means women may participate in their own subjugation. Furthermore, ‘one may question whether “giving voice” to individual experiences may consequentially preclude a recognition and analysis of the pervasive cultural contexts constraining choices’ (Whitehead and Kurz 2009, 225).

Conclusion: Questions from feminism

‘There is a conspicuous gap in the literature in relation to the context in which stripping takes place’ (Jeffreys, 2008, 154). With the apparatus of stripping translated into public space and with the urban materialization of hypersexuality it is necessity to ask - What is at stake? Hypersexual culture’s relationship to the world of architecture and urbanism is
complex but in accepting the materialisation of hypersexuality in public space then we must also accept that this publicness reinforces women’s objectification and inequality. Is there a need to actively reconsider the relationship between architecture and media? And, to argue that these changes be recognized by designers and government policy? Would this assist designers and policy makers to develop more productive forms of future architectures? Surely. It is hoped that this critique of the strip club becoming public highlights the socio-cultural issues of hypersexuality and urbanism and contributes to an important future debate.

References


