

Vincent Baptist is a lecturer and researcher at the School of History, Culture, and Communication at Erasmus University Rotterdam. He conducted his PhD research as part of the collaborative European research project "Pleasurescapes: Port Cities' Transnational Forces of Integration" and is affiliated with the Leiden-Delft-Erasmus research program PortCityFutures. He holds a research masters in media studies and has previously worked in the digital humanities research program CREATE (University of Amsterdam).

+ URBAN STUDIES, ARCHITECTURE, GENDER STUDIES

When paying a visit to Antwerp, Belgium's main port city, chances are that you will be nudged into visiting the Museum aan de Stroom (MAS). Opened in 2011 as Antwerp's largest museum, it houses a wide-ranging collection and exhibitions focused on the city, its residents and global historical connections created through maritime trade activities. While not nearly as eccentric or spectacular as Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum, the construction of the MAS clearly tried to surf the waves of the now ubiquitous "Bilbao effect." On the outside, the building's geometric alternation of glass and red sandstone elegantly guides the gaze of onlookers up to the MAS's freely accessible rooftop, where tourists can indulge in a panoramic view of the urban industrial surroundings. More surprising than the design and appeal of this new hotspot, however, is the fact that within walking distance of the MAS, another building can be found that epitomizes the nature of the modern port city, albeit according to a wholly different visual logic and character. In the adjacent Schipperskwartier [Skipper's Quarter] lies Villa Tinto, a former harbor warehouse turned mega brothel that concentrates virtually all of the city's sex work industry in one location.

Dubbed a "house of pleasure" on its central sign board, Villa Tinto appears as no less of an icon to the city of Antwerp than the MAS. As prostitution forms an almost inevitable part of the general public's shared imagination of urban maritime pasts, Villa Tinto embodies and exhibits the quintessential spirit of its host city as much as the MAS does. It also taps into the successful yet predictable formula of repurposing disused industrial infrastructure within contemporary urban landscapes. Villa Tinto encapsulates its surrounding port city environment, but the building's singularity also reaches beyond this specific context. In acting as an overarching hub for sex work in the city, it provides fruitful leads to reflect on how landscapes and infrastructures of sex—an inevitable but traditionally shunned part of the urban fabric—should function and appear. In addition, it constitutes a blueprint related to failed efforts and ongoing attempts to concentrate and centralize prostitution and sex work within urban environments. While the Bilbao Guggenheim has been translated into a kind of magic recipe that elevates cultural consumption in cities to unprecedented levels of iconicity, this essay discusses how (re)organizations of erotic consumption and corporeal beauty in contemporary cities have proven trickier to conceive and realize.

VINCENT BAPTIST

SEX IN THE CITY PANOPTICON OR PORNOTOPIA?

In order to explore the question of how infrastructures of sex work have been and could be integrated into—or isolated from—the built fabric of cities, this essay touches on several cases from Western Europe, specifically Belgium and the Netherlands. Prostitution regulation and legalization have arguably been developed and accepted more widely here than in many other parts of the world, congruent with the idea that “the urban geography of the sex industry and how visible it is varies from place to place in parallel with established moral standards.” Yet, a delicate point of discussion that has kept resurfacing on municipal policy agendas in the region over the past decades is the potential control, containment, or grouping together of sex work in such ways that limit their spread and potential nuisance within cities. Gianni Cito, who leads the Amsterdam-based architecture agency MOKE, which recently created a conceptual design for a new, all-encompassing “erotic center” to potentially replace the Dutch capital’s notorious red-light district,² believes the issue of physically consolidating sex work is often pushed by defensive ideas and motives.³ Municipal councilors seem mostly concerned with where to relocate all activities, rather than pondering the question of how a decisive solution should be designed and organized, particularly as a functional and safe space for workers and patrons alike. How should an environment of sex work look and feel?

Regardless of accompanying policy discussions and legislative changes, proposed ideals of centralized prostitution infrastructure act as clear signals of how sex work remains stigmatized and is allowed less leeway than other industries, even in seemingly open-minded urban environments. How, then, does one design a space for practices that are still deemed inappropriate, marginal, vulgar, or even immoral by certain groups and authorities in society? Should new kinds of erotic institutions be established with the actual aim to push away prostitution from everyday life? Or, in contrast, could architecture and planning help to further normalize sex in the city through the creation of publicly acknowledged and purpose-built zones?

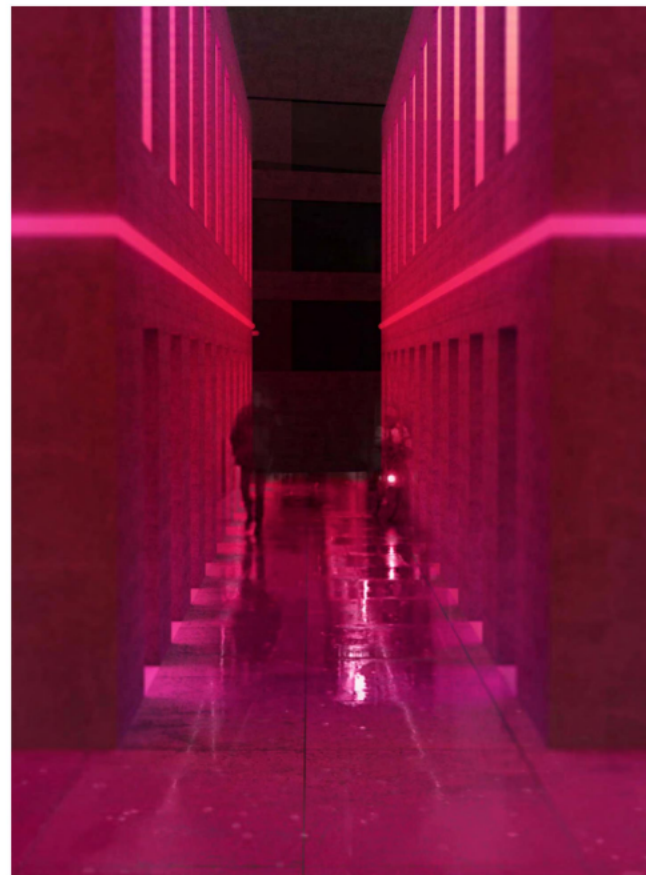
The contemporary redevelopment of post-industrial sites and cities has increasingly trended toward commodification and sanitization – as exemplified by the phenomenon of the “Smooth City,” whereby interrelated processes of gentrification, beautification, and commercialization reshape urban areas into seemingly perfect and frictionless leisure environments.⁴ These trends also follow with respect to the development of spatial

accommodations for sex work. An unrealized design concept from the late 1990s for a new, overarching red-light zone in the Dutch city of The Hague already anticipated this by imagining window prostitution along slick passageways with glass-walled container apartments on the sides, locking up sex workers into elusive but standardized work units.⁵

During the realization of Antwerp’s Villa Tinto, which opened its doors in 2005, safety was touted as the overarching principle guiding the design process. At the same time, however, the project also aspired to deliver a site whose aesthetics would enhance the overall experience for both sex workers and their clientele. The well-known Belgian artist Arne Quinze was commissioned to help design the building and its facilities, after previously having expressed his personal interest in giving the sex trade business a more commendable style and beautiful appeal.⁶ Quinze had previously established a label for design furniture characterized by bright colors and lean geometric shapes, and it is easy to imagine how such quirky aesthetics have stimulated Villa Tinto’s lead partners to create “something ‘trendy and unique’ but also ‘hygienic, ergonomic, and safe.’”⁷

This overall playful character may well invoke flirty Playboy-esque visions, but in this respect, it is worth pointing out that the once-ubiquitous erotic media and lifestyle empire was itself founded on hyper-masculine ideals. Praising modern architects and designers as the powerful urban bachelors that would create and inhabit exquisite penthouse apartments,⁸ Playboy-branded spaces showcased masculine style and sophistication to such an extent that women were objectified alongside the tasteful furniture pieces. Playing into such tropes in the context of new sex work environments can thus potentially jeopardize and oppress female presence and agency. In addition, the so-called “pornotopic” infrastructures constituting the classic Playboy universe have always facilitated male comfort and seduction, often through high-tech innovations and gadgets.⁹ However, the devices integrated into Villa Tinto’s interiors are not technologies of pleasure. Rather, from multiple alarm buttons in every room to a fingerprint reader for employees, they clearly indicate that safety remains a key concern for sex workers, as they face threats of violence and exploitation seemingly endemic to the sex industry.

Despite their utopian aspirations and appeal, large-scale erotic centers and entertainment districts are not necessarily able to





provide an environment where everything harmlessly revolves around sexual beauty and bodily desire, even when tightly controlled and organized. Nicole Kalms attributes their potential risks and harm to the heterosexual dominance, male privilege, and gender-based objectification that remains ingrained in many urban sex landscapes.¹⁰ Among others, Kalms points to the fact that many women often refrain from passing through sex-business zones in cities out of unease and fear of harassment. It makes me recall my own experience walking around the Villa Tinto block, together with my mother and sister. While spontaneously initiated out of fun and curiosity, the walk grew increasingly grim and uncomfortable as we tried to make our way through the sheer endless stream of male individuals and groups casting aggressively yearning looks, not only at Villa Tinto's show windows but also at any passersby who did not fit into the mono-masculine composition of the clientele swarming around outside the brothel walls. Villa Tinto's initiators may have put care in striking the right balance

between sexy and safe for the building's looks and interiors, but the adjacent public space makes for a less pretty picture.

According to Gianni Cito, the dynamic between interior and exterior space was one of the most important aspects in MOKE's concept for Amsterdam's new concentrated erotic center. Unlike Villa Tinto's direct surroundings, which remain sparsely developed, the famous De Wallen red-light district in Amsterdam's inner city boasts a large number of tourist-oriented facilities, which have only added to the area's popularity in recent times, as well as to its congestion. Overtourism in Amsterdam has caused an increasingly unmanageable and rowdy mass of visitors to be channeled through the narrow historical streets of De Wallen on a daily basis. Plans for redevelopment of the red-light district that were launched over the past decades in significant part stem from local policy makers' heightened sensitivity to the stereotypically "trashy" tourist that De Wallen primarily attracts, as well as to how these guests' local spending

sustains criminogenic businesses in the neighborhood.¹¹ At MOKE, Cito sought to recapture the normal workings of an inner-city district: the resulting design aims to make casual wandering the focal activity again, no longer through blatantly commercialized and motel corridor-like streets, but along an upwardly spiraling trajectory where sex workers can present themselves. At the same time, workspaces of colleagues do not directly face each other anymore but rather look out over the captivating urban skyline.

With its curvy shapes and color palette that accentuate but do not overindulge in erotic spectacle, the MOKE design appears more sensible than both flashier and starker plans that stirred earlier debates in the Netherlands. During the 1970s, for instance, Rotterdam was under the spell of fierce protests against prostitution and accompanying criminal activities that had overrun Katendrecht, a disadvantaged neighborhood on the southern riverbanks of the port city. The municipal council tried to curb the social unrest and took stock of best practices in some German cities: new "eros flats" had been constructed there at the time, but the idea of erecting a dreary apartment building to function as a panopticon was mocked and challenged by Rotterdam residents.¹² By the late 1970s, Dutch architect Carel Weeber put a completely opposite plan on the table. One newspaper columnist wondered at the time: "Only the office building of a toaster company should look like a toaster. How would an eros center look?"¹³ Perhaps like a giant penis? Weeber's solution for Katendrecht's troubles envisioned exactly that: a horizontal phallic building that would connect different pleasure facilities with one another.¹⁴ The provocative idea was never realized, but it did place Weeber in a curious tradition of phallus-shaped building and landscape plans previously started by 18th-century French architects like Claude-Nicolas Ledoux and Pierre-Adrien Pâris.¹⁵

Weeber himself continued to muse about mass erotic infrastructures during later years, embracing the kitschiness that such designs could freely bring to overregulated built environments.¹⁶ Granted, a penis-shaped brothel may be regarded as ecstatic and enticing in its overt materialization of sexuality,¹⁷ but it is also still easy to dismiss as ugly and shallow. Henri Lefebvre once cried out "No, no!" when seeing plans for a "center for sexual relaxation" that mimicked female body parts, but produced little more than a sterile "pleasure machine" in his eyes.¹⁸ The more contrived a brothel's appearance, then,

1 Magdalena Sabat, "Spatial Regulation of the Sex Industry in New York City," *LA+ Interdisciplinary Journal of Landscape Architecture* 2 (2015): 67, referencing Phil Hubbard & Teela Sanders, "Making Space for Sex Work: Female Street Prostitution and the Production of Urban Space," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 27, no. 1 (2003): 75–89.

2 See Make Architecten, "Erotisch Centrum," <https://www.mokearchitecten.nl/portfolio/erotisch-centrum/> [accessed July 19, 2022].

3 All statements and opinions from Gianni Cito throughout the text have been obtained during a personal interview, conducted on June 21, 2022.

4 René Boer, "Smooth City is the New Urban," *Volume* 52 (2018), <http://archis.org/volume/smooth-city-is-the-new-urban/>.

5 Juliette Bekkering, "Red Light Zone," in Hans Ibelings (ed.), *The Artificial Landscape: Contemporary Architecture, Urbanism, and Landscape Architecture in the Netherlands* (NAI Publishers, 2000), 57.

6 Elaine Knutt, "Villa Tinto," *ICON* [March 23, 2007], <https://www.iconey.com/icon-026-august-2005/villa-tinto-icon-026-august-2005>.

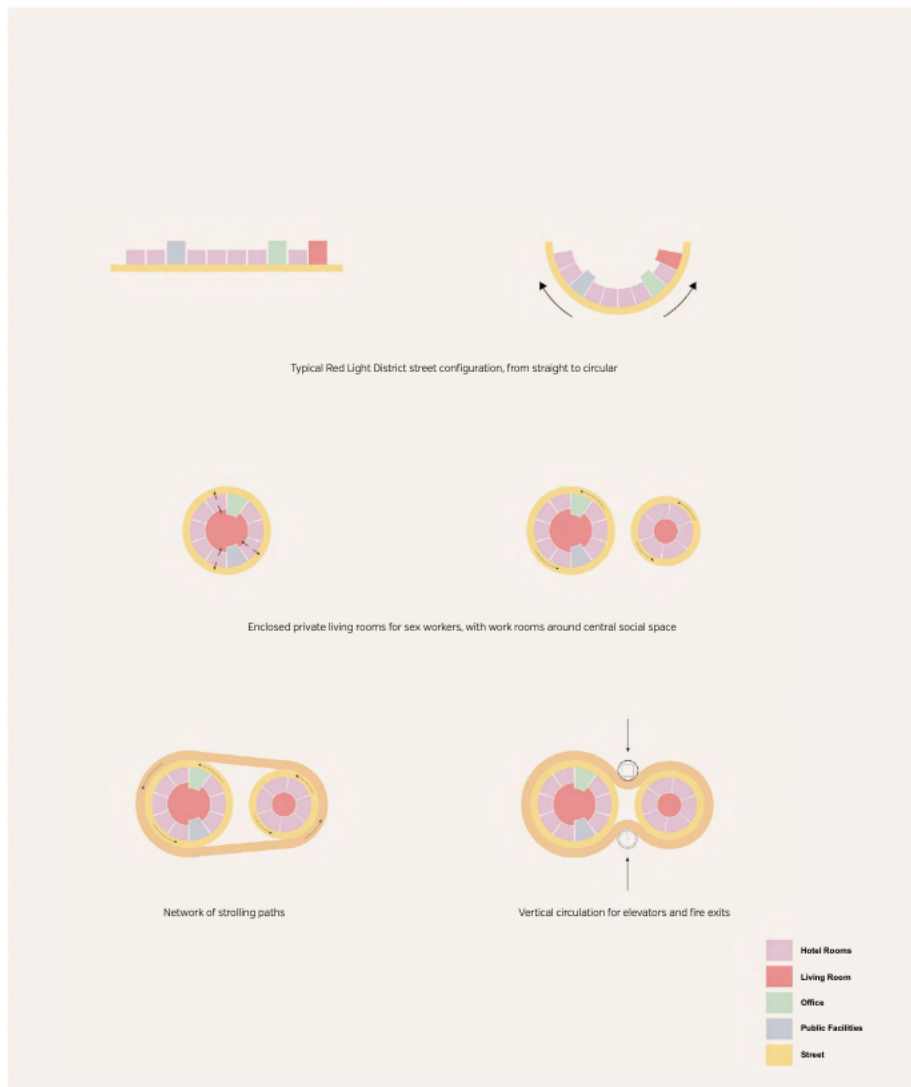
7 Annalee Newitz, "Hooking Up the Hookers," *WIRED* (November 1, 2005), <https://www.wired.com/2005/11/hooking-up-the-hookers/>.

8 See Playboy, "Playboy's Penthouse Apartment," in Joel Sanders (ed.), *Stud: Architectures of Masculinity* (Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 54–67; and Beatriz Colomina, "Radical Interiority: Playboy Architecture 1953–1979," *Volume* 33 (2015), <https://archis.org/volume/volume-33-beatriz-colomina-radical-interiority-playboy-architecture-1953-1979/>.

9 Colomina, "Radical Interiority." For a further elaboration of this topic, see also Paul Preciado, *Pornotopia: An Essay on Playboy's Architecture and Biopolitics* (Zone Books, 2019).

10 Nicole Kalms, "No Harm Done? Sexual Entertainment Districts: Make the City a More Threatening Place for Women," *The Conversation* (August 9, 2017), <https://theconversation.com/no-harm-done-sexual-entertainment-districts-make-the-city-a-more-threatening-place-for-women-81091>. A further elaboration of this topic and argument can be found in Nicole Kalms, *Hypersexual City: The Provocation of Soft-Core Urbanism* (Routledge, 2017).

11 Manuel Aalbers, "Amsterdam," in Tsaiher Cheng (ed.), *Red Light City* (The Architecture Observer, 2016), 85–88.



the more it risks draining the very essence of what it tries to sell. In the meantime, however, newly envisioned erotic centers need to sell much more than just sex. The Belgian coastal town of Ostend is currently redeveloping a derelict port hangar into a mega brothel that will also house office spaces and a micro-brewery.¹⁹ A more traditional idea of installing a new maritime museum in the old building was abandoned during earlier discussions. The Bilbao effect is surpassed by the Villa Tinto prototype.

MOKE's design also aims to offer a more holistic pleasure package. Capturing the breadth and scope of sex services, beyond merely prostitution, and other urban amusements within one building is what makes the project challenging and exciting, Gianni Cito says: "It would be too easy to come up with architectural concepts that are too simple, like a prison or a shopping mall." And again, there is the question of where in the city the erotic center would land, if approved by the municipal council. Cito points out Amsterdam's business district and financial hub, the Zuidas. Another male-dominated urban playground? Yes, "but our research showed that many internationals working there do make up an important part of the red-light district's clientele." Cito explains, "so why not bring De Wallen to its customers?" Among the corporate skyscrapers, a space could be carved out for a new, more sensual type of tower, one that may not necessarily reconcile all public opinions but at least stands tall and in harmony with the nature of a contemporary city.

Despite the growing predictability regarding "urban icons,"²⁰ a new eye-catching high-rise may well be an appropriate way forward to elevate the current visibility and status of sex work in cities, especially if a more inclusive scale of erotic desires and offerings can be safely accommodated in the process. Ascending the spiral hallway of MOKE's proposed erotic center would then be not too far removed from walking up the MAS's public staircase, with the difference that visitors are not chasing the ultimate rooftop selfie but instead surrendering to perpetual circling, glancing, and seductive *flânerie*. After all, is that not what has made modern cities beautiful and appealing in the first place?

¹² Vincent Baptist & Paul van de Laar, "Pleasure Reconsidered and Relocated: Modern Urban Visions in the Wake of Rotterdam's Discontinued Amusement Areas," in Carola Hein, Robert Bartłomiejski & Maciej Kowalewski (eds), *Hustle and Bustle: The Vibrant Cultures of Port Cities* (Brill, forthcoming).

¹³ Hans Kok, "In de stad," *NRC Handelsblad* [January 4, 1979], 8.

¹⁴ Baptist & Van de Laar, "Pleasure Reconsidered and Relocated" [forthcoming].

¹⁵ Adélaïde de Caters, "Instituciones de libertinaje," in Adélaïde de Caters & Rosa Ferré (eds), *1000 m2 de deseo: Arquitectura y sexualidad* [Centro de Cultura Contemporánea de Barcelona, 2016], 29–32; Adélaïde de Caters, "El espacio como trampa," in Adélaïde de Caters & Rosa Ferré (eds), *1000 m2 de deseo: Arquitectura y sexualidad* [Centro de Cultura Contemporánea de Barcelona, 2016], 65.

¹⁶ Rik Kuiper, "Welke ideale stad moet in het Markermeer verrijzen? Schetsen van Utopia," *Quest* [May, 2007], 24–25.

¹⁷ For an essay that more thoroughly reflects on the bonds between ecstasy, erotics and architecture, see Neil Leach "Ecstasy," in Charles Jencks (ed.), *Ecstatic Architecture: The Surprising Link* (Academy Editions, 1999), 66–77.

¹⁸ Henri Lefebvre, *Toward an Architecture of Enjoyment* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 48.

¹⁹ Alan Hope, "Coming Soon to Ostend: Mega-Brothel with Own Police Station," *The Brussels Times* (August 4, 2021), <https://www.brusselstimes.com/news/belgium-all-news/180094/coming-soon-to-ostend-mega-brothel-with-own-police-station>.

²⁰ See Maria Kaika, "Autistic Architecture: The Fall of the Icon and the Rise of the Serial Object of Architecture," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29, no. 6 (2011): 968–92.

Previous: Model of Carel Weeber's design for the Katendrecht eros center.

Opposite: Program organization diagrams of MOKE's proposed erotic center in Amsterdam.