



Pornotopia

*An Essay on
Playboy's Architecture
and Biopolitics*

Beatriz Preciado

ZONE BOOKS • NEW YORK

2014

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633 Vanderbilt Street
Brooklyn, NY 11218

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Originally published as *Pornotopia: Arquitectura y sexualidad en "Playboy" durante la guerra fría* by Editorial Anagrama © 2010 Beatriz Preciado, Casanovas & Lynch Agencia Literaria S.L.

Printed in the United States of America.

Distributed by The MIT Press,
Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Preciado, Beatriz.

Pornotopia : an essay on Playboy's architecture
and hipolitics / Beatriz Preciado.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-935408-48-2 (alk. paper)

1. Playboy (Chicago, Ill.). 2. Architecture and society.
3. Masculinity. 4. Bachelors. I. Title.

PN4900.P5P73 2014

051—dc23

2014016769

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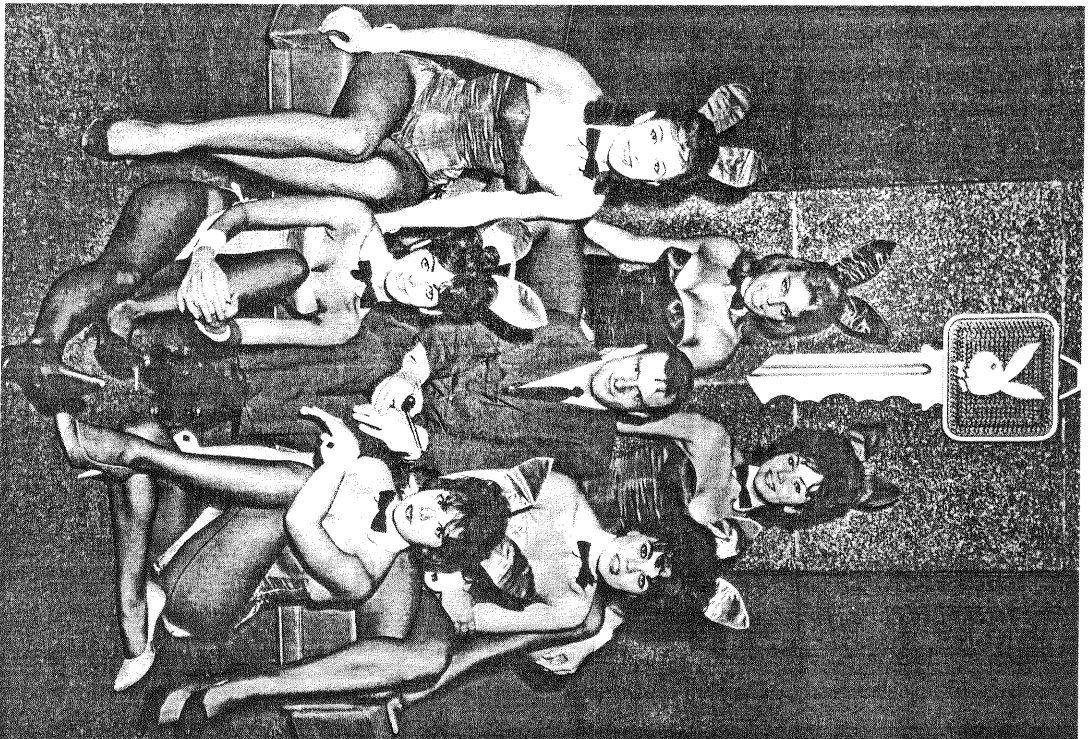


Figure 8.1 Hugh Hefner with six Bunnies who have been featured as Playmates of the Month, 1960s. Clockwise from bottom left: Joni Mattis, Sheralee Conners, Christa Speck, Joyce Nizzari, Susie Scott, and Carrie Radison (Archive Photos/Getty Images).

CHAPTER EIGHT

Playboy Spatial Products: The Playboy Club and the Playboy Archipelago as Pornscape

In February 1960, Hefner opened the first Playboy Club at 116 East Walton Street in Chicago. The club was built as a “public” remake of the already postdomestic interior of Hefner’s Playboy Mansion. “Each of the four floors was designed as a ‘room’ in the mythical and fabulous bachelor pad—there was a Playroom, a Penthouse, a Library and a Living Room.”¹ The ticket to enter the club was a bunny-logo key, similar to the one that appeared in the 1956 Playboy Penthouse article, purchased by visitors for five dollars. As Louis Marin noticed in his 1973 bitter critique of Disneyland as “degenerated utopia,” the client of the American entertainment spaces is not meant to buy anything (yet) but to pay to have access to the experience of inhabiting the space itself.² Likewise, at the Playboy pornotopia the client did not buy anything but the experience of inhabiting the club itself, accessing for a time the possibility of becoming an *insider*. Governed by the same laws as the Playboy televisual fantasy, clients could look but never touch the more than thirty Bunnies who served each floor of the club. Only privileged clients considered “special guests” rather than mere visitors were given a “Number 1 Key” authorizing them to entertain Bunnies at the clubrooms, but always as “friends” and never as sex workers.

In her study of the architectural configurations generated by global capitalism, Keller Easterling calls “spatial products” the new hybrid spaces, “real-estate cocktails” that “exist in a reflective political quarantine,” at the same time located inside

and outside of established legal and moral rules where they are only subject to the laws of the market: Tourist complexes, theme parks, technological and industrial campuses, airports, residential golf developments, ski resorts, exhibition fairs, shopping centers are all part of these new enclaves that aspire to becoming “total worlds” and “global regimes.”³ “Spatial products,” East-erling argues, do not behave as commodities, but—following the model that Giorgio Agamben describes in his analysis of the camp—they function as “places of exception,” “dislocated locations,” utopically or dystopically hermetic enclosures capable of defining their own rules and forms of organization within the emerging global neoliberal market. For Agamben, a reader of Foucault’s biopolitics, the camp is the “hidden paradigm of the political space of modernity.”⁴ The physical form of the camp can differ, but its key feature is to establish a border between what Agamben calls “bare life,” life without political and legal rights, and political existence. As Carolyn Strange and Alison Bashford have noticed, it seems clear that the space of the camp does not have a single political value. The same institution or practice has contradictory meanings for the communities that isolate and the communities that are isolated. The camp “might be protective from the perspective of the government agency, but illegitimately custodial and punitive from the perspective of the government agency.”⁵ Following Easterling, we could say that the Playboy Club, located at the junction of show business and tourism, positioned at the very junction of legal trade and the sex industry, somewhere between retail space, secret society, and popular media, is Playboy’s first and most genuine “spatial product.” The Playboy Club, a sort of camp for sex for sale, strategically situated in relation to the American city as an “interior exteriority,” behaves as a pharmacopornographic island, creating a territory for white masculine hetero-patriarchal sovereignty while at the same time avoiding the inconveniences of the biopolitical disciplinary norm that equated heterosexuality with family and reproduction.

Spreading from Chicago to Los Angeles, Miami, and London, the Playboy Club behaves as a “Vatican-like state” of vice located within another state, where it deploys its accessible fantasy of male pleasure and arousal.⁶ The Playboy Club is a biopolitical offshore space situated inland: at the very center of the capitalist metropolis. Surpassing the economic, legal, and social differences between Las Vegas, Macao, London, and so forth, whatever its location, the Playboy Club will deliver a homogeneous sexual territory characterized by spatial standardization, the production of overcodified visual icons and the modeling of the female workers.

The Club as Domestic Masculinity

A reminder of the patriarchal order and refuge of the heterosexual family life, the Playboy Club was not a novel space invented by the erotic enterprise, but rather a postwar American version of the most significant space for domestic masculinity within the modern city built in the tradition of the Secret Museum and the male cabinet: the bachelor chamber or the male club.

In her book *The Pursuit of Pleasure*, the feminist historian of architecture Jane Rendell defines the emergency of modern “clubs” as the opening of spaces of “male public domesticity” within the space of the modern city. The first European modern clubs were established during the seventeenth century in the form of coffeehouses, creating an enfolded space in which to develop male private opinion and free speech. Writes Rendell, “The publicness of coffee houses, arenas for debate, free speech and radical politics during the following political reforms of 1688 suggested both autonomy and independence. Inns and taverns were considered less politicized, more controlled and respectable; whereas alehouses and ginshops were thought of as disorderly and unregulated, of a lower social status. In order to segregate various grades of customer many houses were subdivided to provide certain clubs with private rooms.”⁷ Initially, clubhouses, such as Arthur’s, the first “members-only” British

club, established in London in 1811, whether private family homes or new purposed-designed buildings, were always modeled on domestic dwellings. Only in the late nineteenth century, with the augmentation of club members, did certain clubs (such as Charles Barry's Travellers' Club established in 1819) break the "domestic" tradition, which required the construction of large freestanding buildings.

According to Rendell, "club rules codified the social relations between different occupants of the club—members and servants, proprietor and members, strangers and members—in spatial terms."⁸ From a Foucauldian point of view, the club works as a gender production *topopolitical* device. The club is power, gender, and subjectivity distributed in space. Going back to our cartography of spatialization of gender and sexuality in modernity, we could say that the club is socialized male *boudoir*. It is a white, male, bourgeois, semidomestic chamber located between the space of heterosexual domesticity and the new "democratic" public space of the city. As an *ethnosemiotic object* placed within the modern city, the club comes to solve a biopolitical dilemma.⁹ Socially constructed and historically inscribed within a physical contradictory architecture, the space of the club can be understood as the dialectical result of the conflicted relationship between domesticity and masculinity, between publicness and interiority, between virtue and vice, between social decorum and individual pleasure.

Rendell defines the club as a patriarchal family space outside the home, where power is stratified as a brotherhood with the proprietor/owner/father situated at the higher position. The social space of the club can be compared to the feudal domestic household with a strong class, gender, and race hierarchical structure distributed into its spatial organization. Gathering a "group of men who set standards of taste in the arts,"¹⁰ the modern club space was also an epistemic and pleasure community close to that of the secret cabinet. Like the Secret Museum, the club, is not so much defined by *what is inside*, but by *who is outside*:

The clubhouse is a place of civil society, free from coercive state, public morality, legal constrain, and corporate interest. At the same time, the club is set aside from emotional pressures and social demands of the private familial realm. Lying between the political public and the social private, then, the club represents a domestic side to public patriarchy. By offering a private environment without the stresses of family life and a public realm without its political responsibilities, occupying a clubhouse suggests both the comfort and the freedom of being "at home" but in the public spaces of the city.¹¹

Nevertheless, the club was not a totally masculine space. Lewis Erenberg examines the social spaces created by the nightlife in American cities during the twentieth century. For Erenberg, the nightclub offered the middle class a space between the public and the private realms for social and sexual experimentation. Although part of a larger process of transformation of the public space into a commodity and therefore highly related to white middle-class economic and political power, the club created a zone of exception not only for men but also for women and sexual minorities, a place to subvert both the norms of the public and the private spheres.¹² Following this tradition of "male domesticity," the Playboy Club was thought as a reproduction of the Playboy Mansion, operating as a surrogate domicile, a sort of postdomestic theme park, "extraordinary" and yet "familiar" where men were not fathers and women were nonreproductive bunnies.

The club was given the power of a gender-performative machine in which space itself could turn any white man into a playboy. Interiority and the space itself were not simply decor, but rather a strongly ritualized space for producing subjectivity enabling the visitor to perform the role of the ideal bachelor for a few hours. Art Miner, the architect who designed the interior of the Clubs, termed "familiarity" the relationship between domesticity and surprise, between imitation and singularity at work in Playboy's spatial standardization: "Nobody has designed as many night clubs as we have and every one of them has to be unique and at the same time a part of the total Playboy Club atmosphere. The

feeling we want to create from one Club to another is familiarity rather than similarity.... In our building and designing the 'feel of the place' is something we always try to retain while at the same time creating the 'Playboy feel.'¹³ Familiarity was privacy without heterosexual domestic restrictions, public excitement without danger: The club was a public space negotiated and marketable as male commodity and private property.

The Playboy space product is saturated with overcodified visual icons: every image and every worker is aimed to become a Playboy logo. The cultural dialectics between secrecy and publicity, between intimacy and the market materialized in the tension between the dark smoky interior atmosphere and the light of visual technologies that filled the space, from cinema projections to television sets and Playboy signs. Moreover, dark and light were gender-distributed differences: whereas the male client remained anonymous and therefore unrepresented, women workers were transformed into visual signs. The Bunny's public body, as much as the club's space, was an invention and function of Playboy's entertainment industry. The first Bunny uniform was designed for employees of the original Club in Chicago in 1960 as part of the process of spatial standardization that extended to design objects, bodies, and subjectivities without distinction. Still showing the mutation from pet male rabbit to female bunny, the outfit started out as a form-fitting, low-cut, one-piece satin bathing suit accessorized with the collar, white cuffs and bowtie typical of a man's suit, rounded off with the bunny ears and a fluffy bunny tail.¹⁴ Last, and just as important as the uniform, was the modeling of Bunnies' behavior. The rules that governed the conduct of Bunnies in the Club were set out in the "Bunny Manual" written by Keith Hefner and in a training film that demonstrated how to master the three basic maneuvers: the "Bunny Stance," which showed the waitress how to stand; the "Bunny Dip" for serving drinks; and the "Bunny Perch" for resting while remaining upright and appearing available.¹⁵ Inseparable from the decor of the clubs, the Bunnies, like a biopolitical incarnation

of Debord's spectacle, were Playboy capital, accumulated to the point that it becomes body.¹⁶

Between familiarity and libertinage, the Playboy Club is a conglomerate of domesticity and vice, a performative fiction of white male sexual power and female submissiveness. In the visual documents from the early 1960s, we can always see a group of white middle-class men in suits being served by a series of women infantilized and animalized by pink bunny ears and cotton tails—and sometimes, in the background, nonwhite male servers and musicians. The performative space of the club is organized around a strongly ritualized gender action. A general structure of theatricality links the members of the club in a ritual system, a parodic organization of space where masculinity and femininity are staged through the actualization of a heterosexual and yet not monogamous narrative. As Louis Marin points out, *iterability* is one of the fundamental features of signifying structures organized as social spaces:¹⁷ Everything in the club is the repetition of Hefner's postdomestic space, which was itself the repetition of an early-century male club supplemented by media and surveillance technologies. Nevertheless, white masculine power is at the same time performatively enacted within the Playboy Club and eroded by the very fact that the client must pay to access the sovereign territory, acknowledging this way that his power is being staged (and somehow designed and owned) by Playboy Enterprises. Collapsing power and parody, sovereignty and ridicule, the Playboy Club produces and at the same time undoes white masculinity.

The homogenous decor of the different Playboy spaces and the standard use of the Playboy logo on all company accessories and employees create a similarity between Playboy spatial products and the architecture of the eighteenth-century male lodges and brotherhoods promoted by Restif de la Bretonne or Nicolas Ledoux,¹⁸ with the difference that now the spatial products and signs garner no relationship to the state or to religious or meta-physical narratives, but are connected solely to the enterprise

and the production of pleasure as capital. Masculinity, detached from transcendental values, becomes the generic code of capitalism. Playboy spatial products create an erotic-consumer brotherhood in the age of pharmacopornographic capitalism where the mother lodge or mansion is a multimedia set, and the logo, supposedly a secret symbol of vice and transgression, is simply a mass-market accessory.

The Brothel in "Modern" Disguise

What Art Miner called "a revolution in hotel design,"¹⁹ speaking of the Playboy Club in 1964, was simply the superimposition, in a single building, of the programs of the hotel, the performance club, the strip club, and the brothel, a combination form that would become characteristic of Las Vegas casinos: Playboy clubs had a stage and a dancefloor; gambling, dining, and banqueting rooms; auditoria; an amphitheater with several stages; and a series of rooms where the keyholders could spend the night.

Not surprisingly, Miner considers "security" for the client a major "architectural concern," since issues of health, body integrity, and social decorum are central, as we learned with Restif de la Bretonne and Alexandre Parent Duchâtelier, to the closed space of masculine consumption of sexuality. Since the club was built for "partying," design should find an equilibrium, according to Miner, between "modern aesthetic" and "security concerns." Although represented as a space of transgression, the club was built as a "secure" playground:

A typical example occurred in the New York Club. Shortly after opening, we became concerned about the modern, unrailed stairway. Though such stairways are widely used in new architecture, we worried about the keyholder who might have one too many and fall overboard. It was a challenging problem for our design department, because we didn't want to make any compromise aesthetically. As it turned out, our solution—a great conical net surrounding the stairway—took nothing away from the design but actually enhanced

it. Most Manhattan keyholders don't realize the safety factor of the netting, but simply think of it as a dramatic addition to the décor.... Our chairs, for example are specially designed with the legs set far in toward the center so that there will be no chance at all for Bunnies or guests catching their heels on a chair leg and tripping.²⁰

Playboy's obsessive reference to "modern design" could be rather understood in relation to the principle of Restif de la Bretonne's state brothel of "camouflage" as a "hygienic" maneuver that sought to uproot the club from its prostitutional origins. The "modernist" look could even be interpreted as the result of the camouflage techniques for the concealment of the architecture of the brothel into a corporate building.²¹ The supposedly "modern design" of the Playboy Clubs came to veil any connection between Playboy and traditional forms of consumption of sex in the city. This camouflage and "cleansing" process was operated by a radical break between the facade and the interior of the club. The contradiction between the outside and the inside at the club was just the opposite than the one identified by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour when describing Las Vegas architecture not even two decades later:²² Whereas in Las Vegas the facades behave as signs that inflect toward the highway trying to absorb the client inside the casino, the facade of the Playboy Club tried to merge with corporate architecture buildings, visually displaying its difference only inside. Most of the Playboy Clubs had a glazed facade and colored panels displaying only the Playboy logo, while the interiors resembled 1950s hostess bars and strip clubs, designed after the famous Gaslight Club that had opened in Chicago in 1953 and inspired the first Playboy Club.²³

This camouflage and cleansing operation was particularly important when a Playboy Club was located in one of the city's former brothels, as in New Orleans and San Francisco, since the new club had to fight legal brigades and urban memory alike. This was how *VIP Playboy* magazine described the San Francisco club:

A year ago, when wrecking cranes began leveling a vaguely Italian Renaissance-style construction at 736 Montgomery Street in preparation for the building of Playboy Bunnydom by the Bay, a local historian named Bert Lund informed us that the structure we were smashing to bits had been built in 1853, and was referred to in newspapers of the time as the clubhouse on the corner. It survived the 1906 fire and earthquake only to lose its reputation in 1951 when brothels began to flourish in the neighborhood. Today the brothels are gone and the area at the foot of the Telegraphs Hill is the sophisticated center of Golden Gate night life. In a few months the house on the corner will "close" its doors and become San Francisco's most elegant club once more.²⁴

By making this urban cleanup part of Playboy's mission, Hefner, transferring Restif de la Bretonne's claim for an urban state brothel into a neoliberal economic context, pretended that the spread of the Playboy archipelago would end all prostitution spaces in the city. The author of the article "No Room for Vice," published in the January 1959 issue of *Playboy*, suggested that the modernization of America during the postwar period must lead to the replacement of the old-fashioned "red-light districts" and "old theatres of vice" with new "bachelor quarters." Similarly, he opposed the old forms of "prostitution" to the new form of "feminine sexual freedom":

There aren't any prostitutes in Chicago for the same reason that there aren't any straw hats in the North Pole. They would starve to death, says detective Seitzer. Every fourth female over 18 in the city of Chicago is very active sexually, either on a romantic basis or a financial one. Usually on both... In addition, there must be at least a hundred thousand girls living in the bachelor quarters where they are able to entertain their bosses and business associates. I have not, in my time as a police officer, heard of any male Chicagoan complaining about sexual frustration. To the contrary.²⁵

This article, which uses one of the key arguments of pharmacopornographic capitalism, does not argue for the liberalization of

the sexual market, as the traditional anti-pornographic feminist criticism of *Playboy* would have it. The aim was not about the "democratization" of sexual services previously offered by a small group of women who were considered prostitutes and extending it to the ensemble of the American female population. *Playboy* magazine's promotion of the transformation of work into leisure as the main lifestyle guideline for the new bachelor was coupled with the Playmate's ability to transform sexual labor into entertainment. No prostitution in the traditional sense is involved, because women were not supposed to be remunerated for sexual services. Playboy's entrepreneurial aim was to transform heterosexual men as well as women into consumer-clients of the Playboy sexual pornotopia and its spatial products.²⁶ Playboy was, in this sense, one of many symptoms of a mutation from the traditional forms of repression and control of sexuality that had characterized early capitalism and its Protestant ethic toward new, horizontal, flexible, and risqué ways of controlling subjectivity and the body, replacing the straightjacket with a pair of bunny ears and a fluffy tail and the panopticon by a novel combination of the TV set and the rotating bed, of the male club and the pill.

In a few years, with the aid of the "modern aesthetics" campaign, Playboy managed to "clean" the image of the company, creating new associations between consumption and sexuality, between electronics and flesh, between American capitalism and libertinage. By 1967 *Time* magazine described Playboy Enterprises this way:

Spectator Sex. To some visitors, the trap door and the glass wall are the real symbols of Hugh Hefner's achievement. Bacchanalia with Pepsi. Orgies with popcorn. And 24 girls—count 'em, 24—living right overhead! Not to mention all those mechanical reassurances, like TV and hi-fi. It is all so familiar and domestic. Don Juan? Casanova? That was in another country and, besides, the guys are dead. Hugh Hefner is alive, American, modern, trustworthy, clean, respectful, and the country's leading impresario of spectator sex.²⁷

By the mid-1960s, Playboy spatial products embodied a new ideal of hetero-patriarchal territory within the context of global capitalism and mass consumption.

It seems clear today that Playboy's spatial products as well as its gender and sexual narrative had a significant impact on the radical architecture and critical movements that emerged during the late 1950s and 1960s, influenced by hedonism, psychedelia, popular culture, the radicalization of the political premises of architecture, corporate architecture, and postmodernism. In terms of sexual politics, not feminism but Playboy's gender codes and the "Playboy ethics" (white, masculine, middle-class, hetero-pharmacoporn, and antifamily) seems to have modeled some of the programs of the radical architecture projects, both neoliberal and leftist.

Cedric Price's *Fun Palace* (1959–61), commissioned by Joan Littlewood, the founder of the Theater Workshop at the Theater Royal of London, can be seen as an extended urban Playboy Club, intended to be "a laboratory of fun," planned as an open steel-gridded structure that could support a flexible program. "Hanging rooms for dancing, music and drama, mobile floors, walls, ceilings, and walkways, and advance temperature system that could disperse and control fog, warm air, and moisture were all intended to promote active fun."²⁸ A few years later, Ettore Sottsass used the *Planet as Festival* series (1972–73) to depict a quasi-Helmerian pornotopia where all of humanity would be free from work and social conditioning. In this futurist vision, goods are free, abundantly produced, and distributed around the globe. "Freed from banks, supermarkets, and subways, individuals can come to know by means of their bodies, their psyche, and their sex, that they are living."²⁹ Breaking the line between architecture and design, Sottsass's black-and-white studies for hand-colored lithographs transform sexual organs into entertainment building and machines for pleasure production, like the giant dispenser for drugs or laughing gas that could result from the recombination of Restif de la Bretonne and Nicolas Ledoux's social temples and Playboy spatial products.

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The Neverending Club as Pornscape

From 1961 to 1965, Playboy went global: It constructed sixteen Playboy Clubs in cities around the United States, including Chicago, New York, New Orleans, Boston, Miami, and San Francisco. The firm opened a Caribbean Playboy resort in Jamaica and started the construction of a \$9 million year-round resort near Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. The most remarkable design project was conceived for the Los Angeles Playboy Center Club, with a penthouse overlooking the entire downtown Los Angeles area and a VIP room with the skyline as its backdrop. The conquest of interior space promoted by *Playboy* magazine beginning in 1953 was indeed taking place.

The economic and cultural success of *Playboy* was immediately translated into the cartography of the city of Chicago. In 1965, Hefner acquired an entire skyscraper known as the Palmolive Building, "the cornerstone of the Magnificent Mile" at 919 North Michigan Avenue, signing a check for \$2.7 million to close the deal. Playboy's Chicago offices after 1967 occupied one-third of the thirty-seven-story building, half a block from the Playboy Club. "The move to larger quarters" explained manager Robert Preuss, "is the reflection of tremendous growth and a solid vote of confidence in Playboy for the future."³⁰

By the mid-1960s, the Playboy Club and Hefner's pad on Chicago's North State Parkway had become a considerable tourist attraction, with guided tours available to anyone who has a minimum of pull: "in the last three months of 1961, more than 132,000 people visited the Chicago Playboy Club, making it the busiest night-club in the world."³¹ Playboy spatial products were monuments to a major American business success story. Unlike other Chicago businesses, the enterprise was not founded on steel, grain, or transportation, but on a magazine.³² The Playboy Mansion and Playboy Clubs were the expression of a new relationship between architecture, media, and capitalism, in which the basic sources of production were sex and communication—architecture for pharmacopornographic capitalism at its best.

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In the early 1970s, Playboy scattered its clubs throughout the world, creating what the design department called the "never-ending Club," in such a way that Hugh Hefner could go around the world without ever leaving the indoor comfort of the Playboy Mansion. Every city should have its club. As Richard Corliss wrote in *Time* magazine, Playboy's urbanity was in fact becoming "urbunnity," a continuous club peopled by identical bunnies and would-be bachelor playboys. Within this Playboy archipelago, the urban cartography resembled an inner plan of the mansion, with its traps and rooms extended and reproduced from city to city like a Sadean labyrinth. By the end of the century, an uninterrupted domestic multimedia pornotopia belted the planet.

Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai describes neoliberal capitalism as a multiplicity of simultaneous "worlds" constituted by different historical, social, and political communities that, through movements of migration, exploitation, exclusion, or economic expansion, create "disjunction" and "difference" within global homogeneity, giving rise to dissimilar landscapes that Appadurai calls "mediascapes," "ethnoscapes," "technoscapes," "ideoscapes," and so on.³³ Following Appadurai's heterogeneous cartography, we could argue that the never-ending Playboy Club invented in 1960 constitutes the first global "pornscape." By "pornscape" I mean the global configuration of pleasure multimedia technologies, both high and low, tectonic and immaterial, textual and informational, that moving across national boundaries construct a generic code for gender identity and sexual pleasure production for a telemasturbatory disemfranchised community designed and programmed by Playboy's multinational media enterprise. The Playboy pornscape is a pornotopia digitalized, disseminated, and commercialized on a global scale.

Playboy Mansion West: A Multimedia Folly in Hollywood

In the late 1960s, as the country's economic and production centers drifted toward the West Coast, Playboy Enterprises also began to move away from Chicago. Although reluctant to leave

the Playboy Mansion, Hefner had been forced to travel to Los Angeles on a regular basis to participate in the television program *Playboy After Dark*, staying in the penthouse at the Playboy Club during his trips. "Live" under the studio lights, Hefner had fallen in love with Barbara Klein, a student who would soon become Playmate Barbi Benton and his regular companion. A media hermit who controlled both the magazine and the firm from his bed and who rarely went outside of the Playboy Mansion, Hefner devised a way of leaving the house and traveling to the West Coast without stepping out of his habitat: In 1967 he bought a DC-9 plane, which he called "Big Bunny," in keeping with the company's hermetic semiotic code.

If the mansions were fixed incubators, Big Bunny was a flying techno-womb, a transactional space that carried the playboy from one residence to the next without upsetting the environmental balance created by the Playboy Mansion. Painted all black, with the Playboy logo on its tail, Big Bunny was given a makeover to resemble a miniature version of the Chicago Playboy Mansion. It included an oval bed complete with sound system that was reminiscent of Hefner's famous rotating bed, fitted out with seat belts, a rotating chair, a shower for two, an enormous couch-bar, and even a dance floor. And like all Playboy spatial products, the Big Bunny could not exist without its female workers: a team of hostesses in black-and-white miniskirt uniforms and knee-high boots. As *Look* magazine put it, Big Bunny was the first "Playboy pad with wings."³⁴

Like the rotating bed moving without changing place, the airplane was proof of the genuinely heterotopian character of Playboy's spatial products, which were not tied to the jurisdiction of any particular country or territory, but created their own mobile borders as they moved from place to place disseminating Hefner's postdomestic environment outside the mansion. Inhabiting the Big Bunny kinetic pornotopia, Hefner was thus able to make his first around-the-world tourist trip in 1970. Although it touched down at the world's most emblematic spots (Maxim's

restaurant in Paris, the Acropolis in Athens, Saint Mark's Square in Venice, a Kenyan animal reserve, the beaches at Marbella), the airplane did not take Hefner out of his Playboy space. On the contrary, the audiovisual documentation generated during the trip allowed Playboy to brand these tourist enclaves, which were then promoted by Playboy Tours travel agency, and published in *Playboy Gourmet* magazine as Playboy spatial products. Mobile logo and stage for Hefner's tourism adventures, the airplane was a Playboy flying broadcasting station. Apart from the 1970 world trip, Hefner never traveled except to visit his own hotels and clubs, acclimatized islands where he could stay and feel as though he had not moved from his own home.

To consolidate Playboy's colonization of the West, Hugh Hefner bought a mansion in Hollywood in 1971, and for the next four years he lived between the two houses. Playboy polygamy turned into polydomesticity. The double residence brought with it two women, two economies, and two lifestyles. Chicago and the Playboy Mansion meant Karen Christy, the magazine and traditional ways of doing business, while Los Angeles and Playboy Mansion West meant his new romance with twenty-one-year-old Barbi Benton, television, and Playboy's incursions into new forms of economic production based on audiovisual media and on its spatial products, which already far outstripped the profits generated by the magazine.

In 1975, Hefner moved definitively to Playboy Mansion West. The thirty-room house with six acres of gardens and woodland was located in Holmby Hills and considered the most expensive property in Los Angeles. Originally built in 1927 by the son of Arthur Letts, the founder of Broadway department stores, it had been used for several years as a hospitality center for visiting dignitaries. Referring to the utopian Himalayan city described by the writer James Hilton in *Lost Horizon*, whose inhabitants enjoy inner peace, happiness, and fulfillment, Hefner decided to turn the Mansion West into a "Shangri-La" in the middle of Los Angeles.



Figure 8.2 Hugh Hefner cuddles up to his girlfriend Barbara Benton in the "bedroom" of his private DC9-30 jet at Heathrow Airport, 1970 (Popperfoto/Getty Images).

The job of bringing this vision to life went to Suzanne and Ron Dirsmith of the Dirsmith Group, an architectural, landscaping, and engineering firm headquartered in Highland Park, Illinois, since 1971. The Dirsmith Group had already been working for Playboy for six years: it had been involved in designing the interior of Big Bunny, as well as in renovating Playboy's corporate offices on Michigan Avenue, in the Palmolive Building. Specializing in water features, extreme landscaping, and what they called "classical European architecture," the Dirsmiths' international studio developed as the passion for outdoors landscape and neoclassical luxury homes, romantic retreats, home spas, and "McMansions" took over the United States during the 1980s.⁵⁵

Ron and Suzanne Dirsmith describe their architecture as being inspired by the project of Professor Ambrose Richardson from the University of Illinois Graduate School of Design, who once gave them the assignment "to design a living environment to house a husband, wife and two kids who came from another planet in another universe. The alien beings were here in order to study our world and learn about nature on Earth. According to the assignment, these extraterrestrials didn't look at all like humans, but they did have many of our other characteristics: They loved water, music, sex, wine, great food and so forth."⁵⁶ In fact, Hefner's commission was close to Richardson's outer-space assignment, with just one difference: instead of designing for a husband, wife, and two kids (the average American white heterosexual family), the Playboy project was intended to house an (almost alien!) erotic community of up to 1,200 people.

In an interview with journalist Lenny Giteck, Ron Dirsmith remembers Hefner's proposal this way: "I want you to create something that every man would love but few could actually have. This place has to be a dream equal to my dreams for the magazine."⁵⁷ Suzanne and Ron Dirsmith talk about the project of landscaping the Playboy Mansion garden as the creation of a giant outdoor party hall:

Ron: After Hefner went over and saw the place (at Los Angeles Country Club), he came back to Chicago, put together a team of about 30 of his people and flew all of us out on his plane, the Big Bunny. Our instructions were to go through the estate and see if it would be suitable for him. Little did we know that he already had bought the property!....

Suzanne: And everybody took notes on what they thought from various points of view: security, how it would work for his personal staff, whether he would be able to hold parties for 1,200 people, where he could show films on Friday evenings, and so forth. These were very important considerations to Hefner, because he'd been throwing these huge parties and fundraisers at his Chicago mansion. The property in L.A. had fewer than half the number of rooms, so he wanted to make sure it would suit his needs.

The process of reconstructing the Playboy Mansion West was described as an unconventional collective creative process involving not only Dirsmith's architects and Hefner, but also the workers at the mansion:

Suzanne: Hefner was asking everyone—his nymphs, his golfers, his security people, his accounting advisers, and so forth—for their thoughts. People were saying things like, "Wouldn't it be great to have a Ferris wheel out here?" "What if we have a Shoot-the-Chutes or a parachute ride?" They came up with all these loopy ideas.

Ron: But Hefner was pretty sharp. He listened to all of them, but later it became clear that he pretty much discounted most of what they said. We all assembled on the driveway after the walkthrough, and he instructed everyone to present him with formal reports once they got back to Chicago. When he spoke with us, he made it clear that he wanted to have all the outdoor entertainment amenities befitting a Playboy Mansion.

Part of the representational loop that characterized Playboy's multimedia pornotopia, the very process of design and construction of the Mansion West became the object of an erotic film:

the Dirsmiths invited Rhodes Patterson, a well-known designer, cinematographer, and photographer, to document what they described as “a 120-day ordeal.” Patterson was allowed to wander around the grounds in addition to documenting the construction, resulting in a few reels of softcore pornographic material.³⁸

The restoration of the Mansion Playboy West took two years and involved hundreds of laborers building swimming pools, ponds, fountains, animal habitat, redwood forest, tennis courts, games rooms, a movie theater, saunas, Jacuzzis, and the like on various parts of the property. As in the bachelor pad and the “kitchenless kitchen,” Hefner was obsessed by “masculinizing” the house and landscape down to the last detail. He wanted to domesticate and defeminize it in order to create a “manly paradise” accentuated by noble elements (which, according to Hefner, were marble, dark timber, bronze, stone, and the like) and technological accessories.³⁹ But unlike the prevalence of modern design in the plans for the bachelor penthouse published in *Playboy* magazine, and the soft, white, glazed interiors of the Palmolive Building, Mansion West had no explicitly modern decor aside from the omnipresent audiovisual surveillance and playback technology in every part of the house, including the pool and aviaries.

The Playboy Mansion West dramatically broke with the Restif de la Bretonne and Parent Duchâtelet’s traditional penitentiary model that prevailed at the Chicago building, moving closer to an early 1970s variation of Ledoux’s model of the natural asylum, the greenhouse, and the folly. While the Chicago Mansion was essentially a hermetic interior, the Mansion West was a gated park, a private multimedia broadcasting garden that for the first time enabled Hefner to breathe fresh air. As Playboy spokesman Bill Farley put it, “the walled back yard is an exceptionally private oasis where Hefner can wander in his silk pajamas. Visitors view the property at the half-dozen charity events each year that the company sponsors there.”⁴⁰ As opposed to the Chicago urban penthouse, the Mansion West rejected the total urban enclosure, establishing new relationships not only with

the American landscape but also with European and colonial fantasies of nature. Hefner’s superintendent recalls the process of construction and the visual conflict between inside and outside, security and surveillance, freedom and confinement, privacy and publicity, voyeurism and exhibitionism created by the low rocky frontier that separated the Playboy Mansion from other properties in the Holmby Hills: “The Mansion was built over a mound of dirt in the shape they desired. They put rocks over the top and tied them together with steel and mortar. When it set, they dug out the dirt. The man who put it together had very good visual abilities. Unfortunately, he was very short. The rocks look very good, but he put them a little low.”⁴¹ No longer a simple building, the Mansion West complex constructed by the Dirsmiths could be described as a late-capitalist, American-style version of the follies and the fake natural settings that were popular in French and English gardens during the late eighteenth century.

As Celeste Olalquiaga’s historical study has shown, there was a surge in the number of “follies” in the period between 1770 and 1800. The follies came to give architectural form to the new relationship between nature and culture—radically altered by the invention of the steam engine and the industrialization of forms of production, but also by the displacement of the nobility after the French Revolution and the new anatomical representation of sexual difference.⁴² The follies were a desperate attempt to “solidify” a melting sovereign form of power and a mutating idea of nature. They were constructions that mixed cultural and architectural references from different historic periods, and they always included “sham ruins” and “imitations of nature.” Also known as “psychological gardens,” these miniature fantasy worlds sought to transform woods, lakes, and caves into mechanically reproducible objects, small cultural icons.⁴³ Mansion West was a folly of a new melting modernity. The renovations at the Playboy Mansion West completely altered almost the entire landscape. Ron Dirsmith recalls: “When Hefner bought it in 1971, it was an incredible piece of property, but there was nothing in the back

yard—zero.... From a 6-acre lump of clay, workers transformed the grounds into a modern Eden.⁴⁴ The Dirsmiths designed paths, hills, waterfalls, and interconnected pools, all using natural stone and vegetation. The Mansion West was not only a hippie plot, a fake urban garden, but also America's biggest private zoological backyard: Hefner's domestic menagerie held 150 animal species and the largest koi collection in California. The Mansion West, however, was not a collection of animals in cages but was intended, following Dirsmith's philosophy, to be an "integrated human-animal environment," a "total recreation of nature," with llamas, peacocks, flamingos, dogs, geese, cockatoos, and chimpanzees wandering among the lawns and trees, bathed in the swimming pools with guests and even seated in front of the fireplace. The *Chicago Tribune* described Hefner's "personal pleasure park" as "the only working corporate center with animal habitats, a grotto housing whirlpool baths, sunken tennis courts, underground gym, indoor and outdoor aviaries, saltwater and freshwater aquariums—all surrounding a rolling yard dappled with white peacocks, pink flamingos, fuzzy ducklings and free-flying pheasants."⁴⁵

Within the garden, the 100-by-70-foot pool attracted as much attention as the menagerie. Turning air-conditioning into "man-made weather," as its first creator Stuart W. Cramer wanted, the Mansion West created a total hot environment, "using the heat from the air-conditioning system from the house to warm the pool." As the mansion's superintendent argued, "it saves us \$22,000 to \$30,000 a year in gas costs. The pool is heated nine months a year."⁴⁷ As part of the water features, the Dirsmiths designed a fake grotto, complete with fish, thermal springs, and waterfalls. Unlike the Chicago Mansion's grotto, which had been a small, Hawaiian-style pool, the grotto at the Mansion West folly, connected to the outdoor pools by stone passageways, was the watery center of the gardens, and the usual setting for the sexual activities of occupants and guests. Taking inspiration from the Lascaux caves in France, which were a recurring reference

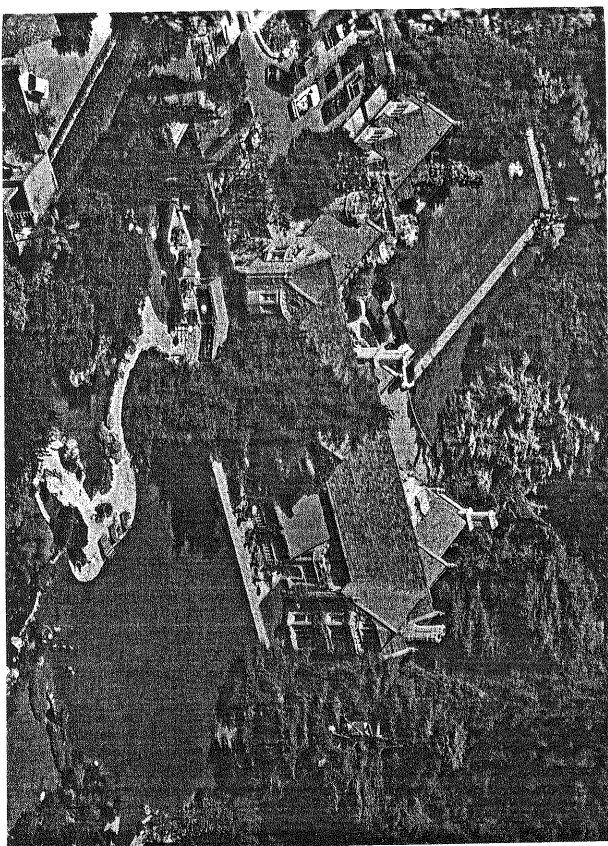


Figure 8.3 An aerial view of the Playboy Mansion, 1995 (Getty Images).

in popular culture during the 1950s and 1960s, Hefner commissioned glass specialist Bob White to build a huge dome over the fake prehistoric cave, using panels in which mummified insects seemed to be trapped in amber, and which visitors ended up jokingly calling "the Jurassic grotto."

Not only was this hot parodic hypernatural setting the petrified heart of pornotopia, but the grotto itself also became the most valuable backdrop for the company's pictorial erotic productions. As in the classical follies, the "Pompeian decoration"⁴⁸ that dominated not only the garden but also the interior of the house was an attempt to artificially reproduce nature and naturalize the artifice, to solidify the organic and bring architecture to life. The reference to Pompeii was by no means banal. Like the ruins discovered beneath the volcanic lava of Vesuvius in 1755, the Mansion West operated as a new Pompeii emerging out of Californian soil. In the best tradition of follies and fake grottos, the Mansion West was an artificial secret garden, a contemporary remake of the Vesuvian fiction onto which media-capitalism had tacked on surveillance cameras as well as photographic and cinematic devices.

Like the Mansion West itself, the images that were produced inside the house and published in *Playboy* magazine were nothing more than fake ruins of sex, the naturalization of techniques of the body and of representation, which seemed like genuine sexual "grottos." But should these spaces be labeled as kitsch?

The notion of kitsch has been used to describe Playboy's erotic settings. This notion emerged in Central European culture in the late nineteenth century to name badly executed and fake artworks, low-quality objects of little value, hoaxes and imitations. Neither merely descriptive nor simply a value judgment, kitsch is a key concept in modern art and architecture history. The notion of kitsch has been instrumental in setting up aesthetic and even moral hierarchies between a genuine experience of beauty and the secondary or surrogate experiences triggered by imitations.⁴⁹ Clement Greenberg's article "Avant-Garde and Kitsch,"

published in 1939, established the framework for discussion in art and architectural history. Following Herman Broch and Adolf Loos's anti-ornament position, Greenberg saw kitsch as a sign of aesthetic and moral degradation that the market and mechanical reproduction brought about in the artistic object, and extended its critique to consider kitsch "as an evil in the art system" related to political contamination and totalitarianism that spread with theater, and the mechanical reproduction of photography. Kitsch thus quickly went from being an aesthetic concept to a political and even moral category. For Adorno, kitsch named an intrinsically modern form of production that responds to rather than betrays the modes of production and consumption of capitalist mechanization. According to Martin Calinescu, kitsch characterizes the form of aesthetic experience in mass society, derived from a "false aesthetic consciousness": kitsch operates under the logic of imitation, betrayal, contraband, or aesthetic deception. But while imitations aspire to be taken for the original, kitsch shows and celebrates its condition as fake.

Barbara Penner has studied the honeymoon resorts that began to proliferate in the United States after the Second World War and that were decorated using similar techniques and creating natural indoors settings. She questions the use of the notion of "kitsch" as the only critical category to understand these stage sets for sex. Likewise, for Penner, the term "pornokitsch," used by Gillo Dorfles in 1969, sets up a misleading hierarchy between the genuine experience of sex and the vulgarity of honeymoon hotels or brothels, as if "emotion can only be experienced authentically in environments of good taste."⁵⁰

By using the expression "pornokitsch" to refer to erotic settings, Gillo Dorfles simply emphasizes a supposedly negative quality of both concepts: pornography and kitsch. Dorfles's pornokitsch becomes tautological, as though kitsch were the pornography of art, and porno the kitsch of sexuality. Moreover, as Walker Benjamin had earlier argued, the notion of kitsch, historically opposing popular culture to art and mass-production

technologies to creation, seems no longer accurate to give account of the complex context of multimedia production and technical representation of sexuality that characterized not only Playboy spatial products but also art and architecture production after the Second World War. In fact, Walter Benjamin was the first to consider the possibility of a critical use of kitsch or even a need for a radical surpassing of the notion of kitsch itself that for him will be embodied by the transformation of cinema into popular art.⁵¹ Having taken into account the process of conception and construction of the Mansion West and its multimedia reproduction, it seems more accurate to displace with Benjamin the notion of kitsch in order to describe Playboy spatial products as technologically naturalized fictions. Sexuality and architecture are never original, but rather are always the product of representation technologies that sought to present themselves as natural, whether it be these fantastic prehistoric grottos or the chaste marital bedrooms of the suburban home.

At the Mansion West, the garden, the animals, and female nakedness were part of this fiction of nature. Nevertheless, nature was not easy to entertain. The constant noise of partying, the constant presence of journalists and television cameras, the inability to keep his wild animals from straying out of his grounds made Hefner an undesirable neighbor in Hollywood. Architect Ron Dirsmith remembers the downfall of the Mansion West's zoo: "Hefner likes people to be free and have their own free choice. He even wanted his squirrel monkeys to be free, but the squirrel monkeys don't know a property line. Twenty-one of them got off the property down Charing Cross Road, and there was a family having a wedding in the garden. They had just set the buffet with fruit. The monkeys destroyed it. But Hef's big kitchen staff replaced all the food for the wedding. Thirty-five people had to go and chase the monkeys. We never told him that until weeks afterward."⁵² The parties ended up being held inside the house, and the monkeys, flamingos, and parrots ended up in cages.

The Dematerialization of Pornotopia

During the 1980s, the transformation of traditional forms of consumption of sexuality, the emergence of video and private television channels, and the restrictions on legal casinos in most North American cities compromised Playboy clubs' profits. When the Clubs began to be an economic burden for Playboy Enterprises, the company started a territorial withdrawal. By 1988, all the Playboy Clubs in the United States had closed down. In 1991, the world's last Playboy Club, Club Manila in the Philippines, closed its doors, putting an end to the nocturnal enclaves that had characterized the expansion of the Playboy archipelago along a never-ending urban belt. Playboy's growth shifted from the real-estate colonization of the 1950s to 1970s to the implementation of video and television spaces. Playboy archipelago started to dematerialize, becoming marketable communications code. In 1980, Playboy launched its own cable-television channel,⁵³ followed by Playboy TV in 1982, with its own reality shows, self-produced series, and erotic films: *The Girls Next Door* and *The Home Bunny*, virtual versions of the Mansion West's indoor life, became its greatest hits. Finally, returning to the dematerialized Playboy Club, in September 2011, NBC launched a TV series called *The Playboy Club*, based on the first Chicago Club. According to the hagiographic narrative of NBC, *The Playboy Club* "captures a time and place that challenged the social mores, where a visionary created an empire, and an icon changed American culture."⁵⁴

The process of dematerialization of the pornotopia has been coupled with an extension of the semiotic power of Playboy as retail and architecture. While Playboy Enterprises were closing clubs, Playboy Licensing opened a chain of boutiques selling accessories targeted at the young female heterosexual consumer (teenage girls would progressively become the main consumers of Playboy merchandising) in 150 different countries. When the Playboy Club reopened its doors in 2006 at the Fantasy Tower in the Palms complex in Las Vegas, it was no longer just a nightclub linked to a hotel. In the context of the architectural language

created to satisfy commercial demands that Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour identified in *Learning from Las Vegas*, Playboy's spatial products joined an experiential multimedia pornscape. The Playboy Club became part of a gigantic resort, a theme park that could create optimum conditions for consumption: a six-hundred-room hotel and a dozen thematic suites, a nightclub and casino, bars, cafes, restaurants, gymnasiums, a shopping center. The Playboy Club is part of an urban scenography of entertainment, an all-embracing pharmacopornographic environment for arousal and consumption. But sexual transgression is nowhere to be seen: Everything has been mass-produced, to be consumed in a space that is under constant surveillance, in optimum conditions of security and control. The semantic shift from crime, vice, and gambling to amusement, pleasure, and gaming is a symptom of this transformation. As Robert de Niro's Ace Rothstein said in Martin Scorsese's *Casino*, the Club was no longer a place of gangsters and whores, but a multimedia company oriented to family gaming, where the former Mafia style has been replaced by consumer and entertainment managers.⁵⁵

At the Palms Resort, fantasies rooted in popular culture or the sex industry can coexist through vertical distribution in a single space, even if they sometimes appear irreconcilable: the ultra-masculine "Crib Suite," which *Playboy* describes as "living in a hip-hop video;" the all-pink "Barbie Suite," which mixes the Barbie and Playboy logos; and the "Erotic Suite," which reproduces a strip club inside the room, with a stripper pole in the shower and mirrors on the ceiling. In the penthouse, the Hugh Hefner Sky Villa, which the hotel's promotional leaflet describes as "the Las Vegas version of the Playboy Mansion" with room for 250 people, includes a dance floor, movie theater, and even a reproduction of Hefner's famous rotating bed. It is a miniature pastiche of the Playboy Mansion for tourists. Taking the multimedia logic behind the Playboy Mansion to the extreme, the Palms Resort is no longer simply a place to be occupied and consumed, but a TV setting and a broadcasting station for hire, which has been the site

for numerous television programs, among them MTV's *The Real World* and Bravo's *Celebrity Poker Showdown*, as well as being the backdrop for erotic productions.

The Overexposed House

The "Playboy Mansion" (first the Chicago and then the Los Angeles Mansions, but also its Playboy Club and reality-show avatars) is an overexposed space in the sense in which the architect and philosopher Paul Virilio uses the term.⁵⁶ The Playboy Mansion has no stable physical entity, but is continuously reconfigured through information: text, photographic, cinematic, video-game, and cybernetic codes. The Playboy Mansion was first able to spread throughout North America via the magazine and the television program on the condition of being dematerialized through surveillance and communication technologies, and later rematerialized as an array of simulacra and replicas in the form of the hotels and clubs. The process of "overexposure" thus cuts through the house and constitutes it: The internal space is filled with electronic screens and cameras that either transform its habitat into digits and transmittable information or make decoded information flow within it in the form of images. The virtual "hole" generated by the surveillance closed circuit that channels information in an infinite loop thus joins the physical hole created by the grotto at the bottom of the Playboy Mansion. Simultaneously anchored in the classic aquatic-zoological utopia (Atlantis and Noah's Ark) and in traditional information technology utopia, Playboy spatial products exist in mediation, within networks, dwelling in a place that is no longer simply a physical location. Heterotopia meets hypermedia. The Panopticon meets life-simulation video games. It is this overexposure that erodes the classic forms of domesticity, not just in the case of the mansion but also in the traditional suburban home, which is simply one of its inverted copies as a peripheral media receptor, and not the countermodel and ideological antagonist it is supposedly held up to be. The overexposed status of the Playboy Mansion also extends to the body

and sexuality, which, beyond naturalness and kitsch, are simultaneously dedomesticated and publicized. Produced and represented by visual and communication technologies, the body and sexuality are also converted into digits—information, value, and number. Pornotopia meets financial information capitalism.

If the processes that the sociologist John Hannigan and the economist Jeremy Rifkin describe as “Disneyfication” and “Macdonalization,”⁵⁷ respectively, are the result of the effects of the economy of the spectacle on the American city and its consumer habits, we could claim that a process of “Playboyization” affected the forms of organization of domesticity, interior space, and emotional life of American interior spaces during the Cold War. The first expressions of the “fantasy cities” were the architectural-media fictions created by Playboy and Disney in the fifties. Disneyland, opened in Anaheim, California, in 1954, became the first children’s theme park. Five years later, the Playboy Mansion managed to combine media in the form of the magazine, property development, and the use of audiovisual technologies of surveillance and simulation to create a multimedia theme park based on spectacle that was an adults-only erotic fiction.

We could venture that the pharmacopornographic consumer of theme parks that proliferated in the late twentieth century is a hybrid of the child constructed by Disney and the old man/teenager imagined by Playboy. Furthermore, the gender segregation and the irregular policy of sex consumption allows us to imagine an odd and complementary (although legally impossible) theme-park couple: the female, childish Playboy Bunny seems to have escaped from Disneyland to become the object of desire of the male (and not so young) visitor to the Playboy Mansion. It therefore comes as no surprise that in 1983 the Disney Channel and Playboy Channel (seemingly opposite poles in the moral and religious debates that pitted sex against the family, freedom of decision over one’s own body against the defense of childhood) joined their television networks. As *Time* explains: “Disney and Playboy are both purveyors of fantasies. Playboy makes real women

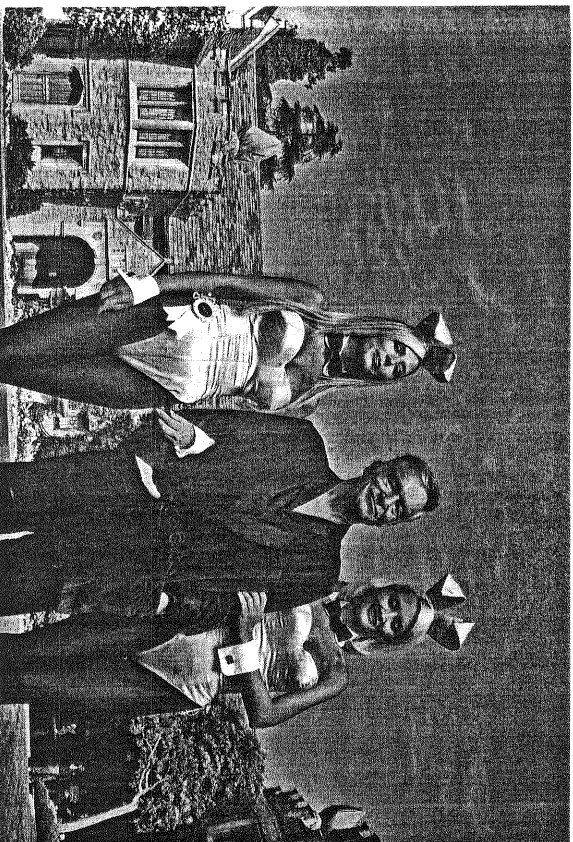


Figure 8.4. Playboy Bunny Shella Levell, Hugh Hefner, and Playboy Bunny Holly Madison perform a scene during the filming of a commercial for X Games IX at the Playboy Mansion May 6, 2003 in Holmby Hills, California (Getty Images).

seem unreal; Disney makes unreal adventures seem real. The Playboy mansion is a sort of Disneyland for adults; Disneyland is the Playboy Mansion for kids.⁵⁸ And this burlesque conclusion: Perhaps the success of the two largest entertainment industries in America depends on the secret weapon shared by Mickey Mouse and the bunnies—their big ears.

But, ears apart, Hugh Hefner's success compared to Walt Disney's is that the Playboy Mansion achieved an assemblage of private residence and theme park, creating a topographic postdomestic type that spread through American architecture of spectacle in the late twentieth century. The "celebrityland" complexes are heirs to Playboy's pharmacopornographic spatial products. First Graceland, which had been built by Elvis Presley in 1957 (two years before Hefner bought the Chicago Mansion) but did not become a media enclave until after his death in 1977. But above all, Neverland: The Playboy Mansion inspired Michael Jackson, a regular guest (along with his surgeon) in the 1980s, to build Neverland in Encino, California, in 1988, bringing together under a single room the artist's home, a private zoo, and a theme park and finally uniting the Disney and Playboy heterotopias. Michael Jackson, like the posthuman media offspring of a Playboy Bunny and a Disney mouse, would become a true pornotopian architect, reclaiming, distorting, and extending the pharmacopornographic legacy into the twenty-first century.

Fordism and Pharmacoporn Biopolitics

We could understand Playboy's erotically consumed relational spaces, from the magazine to the mansions, including all the communication platforms organized around the Playboy Club and its membership community, as the counterpart of Victor Gruen's American shopping mall. In fact, in this pop history of twentieth-century architecture, the club and the mall could be considered the two main urban interiors in Cold War America, and Hefner and Gruen the most influential pop architects of American landscape, far beyond Mies van der Rohe or Phillip Johnson.

Whereas the mall appears as the key consumer-culture space of the postwar years, working in conjunction with the two principal market objects/spaces of Fordist production (the automobile and the suburban house), the club (mainly urban and thought as an alternative to the suburban sexuality and way of life) seems to prefigure the post-Fordist immaterial modes of production and consumption. As opposed to the mall, which exhibits and provides access to the merchandise, the club does not sell commodities but rather *experiences*, providing access to *relationships* rather than to objects. As the first director of the Chicago Playboy Club, Victor Lowmes, put it in 1960, the club was simply "the Playboy lifestyle brought to life."⁵⁹ Architect Art Miner argued that the clubs created a "total playboy habitat," a "*Rabbitat*," in which both space and Bunnies were carefully designed to accentuate the "Playboy feel."⁶⁰ Part of the same semiotic and economic flow, the magazine, the Playboy Mansion, the clubs, and the spatial products created by the magazine formed a programming network dedicate "feelings" to design. The magazine and the architecture of the mansion, hotels, and clubs work here as a media platform where "experiences" are being administered and designed to produce what French theorist Christian Salmon calls a "storytelling": a collective narrative fiction able to shape reality.⁶¹

A forerunner of the way-of-life-programming enterprises to come at the beginning of the new century, Playboy modified the aim of the consumer activity (the kernel of the postwar American culture) from "buying" into "living" or even "feeling" displacing the merchandise and making the consumer's subjectivity the very aim of the economic exchange. If, as architecture and design theorist Sanford Kwinter explains, Victor Gruen dominated "the American psycho-geographical and economic landscape"⁶² of the postwar years, we could argue that Hefner's pornotopia (taking multiple architectural shapes, from the mansions, to the club, Las Vegas casino, and hotel and materializing into multiple vernacular architectural forms from Miami to Manila) anticipated the post-electronic community-commercial environments to come.

Sanford Kwinter describes the fall of the 1950s shopping mall model during the 1990s and its transformation into "a system of community centers": "The task of social commerce today is to engineer sustained relationships, and to invent and produce a seductive experience within which these relationships may be at once extended, cultivated, and buried."⁴³ Grounding economic growth on an erotic and social experience, Hefner somehow surpassed Gruen and prefigured the biopolitical production of the end of the century. Determined by the unique quality of the nonmerchandise Playboy produced (ontologically speaking, sex, desire, and pleasure are nonobjects) and its legal exclusion from the free market (legally speaking, such goods cannot be reduced to merchandise), Playboy spaces behaved already in the late 1950s as the ancestors of the social networks that would emerge in the early 2000s. As Kwinter explains, in order to survive, the new mall—a sort of hybrid of Gruen's and Hefner's programs—will need to combine "these mall infrastructures, these anchors of the emerging 'social-entertainment-retail complex' with the World Wide Web. They propose to create a site where nearly all significant social activity can take place. This is significant not only because it effectively draws public (social) life into a new type of private property, generating both data and wealth ('value') even when no transactions take place, but also because it ingeniously corrects the common wisdom of just a few years ago—to wit, social activity will now take place in real environments enhanced and administered through virtual ones, and *not the other way round*."⁴⁴ Opening a new space between the traditional brothel and the virtual sites for pornographic consumption, between the male club and the arcade, at the same time privatized and public, exclusive and commercialized, Playboy pornotopia built an immaterial bridge between the eighteenth-century secret museum and the twenty-first-century social network. An eroticized version of the park, the television network, and the domestic urban space of the club, Playboy spaces created a social environment for sale that managed to survive the post-Fordist mutations of the city and prefigure the pharmacopornoscapes of the twenty-first century.

CONCLUSION

The Afterlife of a Pornotopia

What you have read up until now has been an autopsy of Playboy pornotopia. While the historian makes dissections of those objects already dead (or approaches them as if they were), the cultural critic is an instigator of the vivisection of semiotecnical systems. Where the historian looks to unearth corpses and assign dates to archaeological traces, the cultural critic seeks out the signs of life of even those systems that appear to have ceased breathing long ago.

That is why this operation intervenes just in time: the heart of Playboy pornotopia is still beating, despite the gradual breakdown of its vital signs, little by little. We cut and diagnose live. It is possible to not only acknowledge the pornotopic Playboy organism still at work, to observe its operations, but also to detect those organs which Playboy will transplant, while there is still time left, over to other sites of production of signification. It is therefore not Playboy as a historical object of study that interests us here, but rather this traffic flow, this survival of systems.

As a conclusion to this autopsy I would say, if it were not to misquote Roberto Bolaño, I've got some good news and some bad news. The bad news is that Playboy's pornotopia is dying. The good news is that we are all necrophiliacs.

The massive circulation of moving images on the Internet has created a new global porn ecology in which Playboy is now nothing more than an old and clumsy predator. Any girl from the most remote regions of Russia or any young person from

we wish
we'd keep
the history
of her
secrets

porn
ecology