

# PROOF OF GUILT

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“It matters little that Bloom can’t be held responsible for any of his acts: he remains nonetheless responsible for his own irresponsibility, which he is *at every instant* given the opportunity to declare himself against. Since he has consented, negatively at least, to being no more than the predicate of his own existence, he is an *objective* part of domination, and his innocence is itself pure guilt.”

*Tiqqun, Bloom theory*

## 1. Guilty as a designer

As I was walking through the faculty around February 2023, I came across a letter to the dean. Its author had placed it at the red staircase, asking members of the faculty to sign it before sending it to the dean. The letter was an alarming declaration of an environmental emergency so severe that “the Faculty needs to declare a climate emergency, directing all their efforts, studios, projects, research programmes, post-masters, and PhDs to the topic of the climate catastrophe.” I couldn’t help noticing that the letter used sentimental language and a moral tone that, to me, felt unfitting for such a serious and scientific topic. To my surprise, the letter was signed by a large number of students, tutors, and other faculty members. To my even greater surprise, a few weeks later the dean replied, agreeing with and validating its key points. The letter triggered in me a sense of guilt for being an architect, as well as anger at the implication that what I like to do—design buildings—is somehow an evil act. I decided to explore this feeling.

My first impulse was to write a polemic against green architecture. I have never liked it; for me, it feels less like a solution to a complex, multifaceted issue such as climate change and more like a particular moral stance. Throughout my years in architecture schools and practice, I consciously avoided, when possible, anything labelled green, sustainable, circular, and so on, because these terms seemed to dictate design methods I did not find particularly compelling. They also triggered in me a sense of moral obligation that could not coexist with my creativity. In other words, when I tried to design as a response to the climate catastrophe, I ended up with projects that felt lacking.

When I began researching the topic, I realized that the feeling I experienced while reading the letter is often referred to as environmental guilt, which is part of a subcategory sometimes described as Western guilt. While my first response was to attack the mechanisms behind this guilt, the more I researched, the more apparent it became that, just as the letter made me feel guilty, architecture can also be used to regulate guilt—to provoke or deter it. I found this far more exciting as a topic for my graduation project than my initial reaction to the guilt the letter induced in me. The latter began to feel like something I should discuss with my therapist.

Through this research I first aim to understand guilt as a concept—especially how it is viewed in philosophy broader and psychology—and then to examine how various aspects of guilt are connected to architecture and urbanity. I was surprised to find relatively little research on the topic. Most of the work I encountered—with the exception of one article—addressed specific cases, and even there guilt was usually treated as a subtheme of a different argument. Guilt is often discussed in the context of urban geographies, but not in the context of design and planning.

I therefore decided to explore general connections between different aspects of guilt and architecture in a broad way, aiming to provide an overview of the topic's various scopes rather than focusing on a single case in depth. I believe this overview is missing and could serve as a starting point for further investigations.

A second area of my research is place-specific, focusing on Amsterdam. The city has a reputation for phenomena with which most cities would not want to be associated—a mythology of sin: sex work, drugs, alcohol, parties, overtourism, and at the same time inclusivity, queerness, and tolerance. How does Amsterdam deal with the guilt associated with these morally charged themes? And to what degree does this mythology correspond to real experience?

Instead of theorizing abstractly, I chose a more experiential and investigative approach for this part of the research. Since I recently started living in the city and have friends there, I thought that my experience as a newcomer could offer an input that is not merely self-referential but also provides clues about how others—and how the city itself—deal with guilt. By writing about my own and, where possible, other people's experiences in critical places, events, or times in the city, I hope to present a more relatable and true-to-life account of the Amsterdam experience.

My intention is for these two parts of the research to enrich one another—from theory to experience and back. Theory provides a general understanding of mechanisms and tools that architecture and planning can use to regulate or respond to guilt. The experiential work offers a glimpse of how some of these mechanisms operate in a city that seems exceptionally “guilty.”

With this intermingling of a general exploration of the connections between guilt and architecture and the experience of a “sinful” city, I first want to illuminate an underexplored area and finally to extract and propose a toolkit for an architecture designed to regulate guilt. I will then use some of these tools in my architectural project.

## 2. Introduction to the concept of Guilt

### Guilt according to Nietzsche

Friedrich Nietzsche's analysis of guilt is primarily developed in *On the Genealogy of Morality* (Nietzsche, 2007). Rather than treating guilt as a timeless or universal moral sentiment, Nietzsche examines it as a social and historical construct that emerged through specific power dynamics and cultural shifts.

Nietzsche traces the concept of guilt (*Schuld*) to an earlier notion of debt (*Schulden*). He argues that guilt originates in primitive creditor–debtor relationships, where morality was grounded in a logic of recompense. In early tribal communities, failing to repay a debt was not merely a contractual breach but a moral offense that warranted punishment as compensation. The creditor was entitled to satisfaction through direct retribution, often enacted physically or violently. This, Nietzsche posits, gave rise to the association between pain and repayment, embedding in human memory the sense that harm must be met with harm (Nietzsche, 2007, II.4).

This economic logic laid the groundwork for the internalization of responsibility. As societal structures evolved and physical punishment became less acceptable, the instinct for cruelty was redirected inward, producing the psychological phenomenon Nietzsche calls the bad conscience (*schlechtes Gewissen*). He describes its origin “as a serious illness to which man was forced to succumb by the pressure of the most fundamental of all changes which he experienced,” ultimately calling “the bad conscience ... the most insidious illness that has come into being and from which man has yet to recover, his sickness of himself.”

Individuals came to feel indebted not to other humans but to the moral order itself, eventually personified in the Christian God. God becomes the ultimate creditor whom no one can ever fully repay. Thus, the transition from social debt to theological guilt marked a fundamental shift in how obligations were experienced—no longer externally negotiated but internally enforced, producing feelings of guilt and self-punishment (Nietzsche, 2007, II.20–II.23).

Christianity, in Nietzsche's view, capitalized on this psychological transformation by reinterpreting suffering and instinctual repression as moral failure and sin. Guilt became the expression of a metaphysical debt to God, embedding it deeply within the Western moral tradition (Nietzsche, 2007, II.21–II.23). For Nietzsche, this theological moral system perpetuated a life-denying ethos by valorizing weakness, restraint, and self-negation.

Nietzsche's genealogical critique reveals guilt not as a moral necessity but as a cultural artifact shaped by historical forces of domination and internal repression. Guilt functions as a mechanism of social control, fostering internalized surveillance whereby individuals police their own thoughts and desires. Morality, in Nietzsche's

view, does not emerge from reasoned consensus or autonomous will but is the product of *ressentiment*, a reactive stance of the weak against the strong. Through *ressentiment*, the oppressed moralize their suffering, elevating it as a sign of moral superiority and using guilt to exact psychological revenge on the powerful.

For this scheme to function, an agent is required—a moral legislator whom Nietzsche identifies as the priest, an “artist” in feelings of guilt who gives guilt form and shape: “‘Sin’—for that is the name for the priestly reinterpretation of the animal ‘bad conscience’.” The priest is not simply a religious figure but a psychological technician, a moral engineer, and a political strategist who shapes and governs human suffering through the technology of guilt.

Nietzsche attributes to the priest an intimate understanding of psychological suffering. However, rather than healing, the priest exploits suffering to assert control. By moralizing pain—turning it into a sign of guilt and sin—the priest gives suffering a cause and a target, thereby offering the afflicted a perverse form of relief. The priest weaponizes the bad conscience by teaching individuals to interpret their suffering as justified punishment for their moral failings (Nietzsche, 2007, III.20).

This redirection of suffering inward, according to Nietzsche, is the true genius—and deep corruption—of the priestly function. The priest does not eliminate suffering; he makes it intelligible through guilt, thereby transforming instinctual life into moralized pathology. In this way, the priest creates the conditions for *ressentiment*, turning vital instincts into chronic, self-destructive emotions.

Nietzsche sees the ascetic ideal, which the priest champions, as a denial of life—a moral code based on negation, abstinence, humility, and obedience. By glorifying weakness and suffering, the priest inverts values, portraying power and vitality as sinful and elevating passivity as virtue (Nietzsche, 2007, III.11). This inversion is the essence of what Nietzsche calls slave morality, and it is this morality that grounds the Western tradition of guilt.

It is important to note that, while Nietzsche’s approach to guilt is widely acknowledged and has informed many contemporary scholars, his view that some humans are inherently weak while others are inherently strong is debatable and controversial. This hierarchical language is often adopted by fascist ideologies and can be misused. Today, most readers interpret Nietzsche’s notion of “weakness” not as a literal or biological claim but through modes of life, power relations, and affective structures.

### **Western Guilt and the history of guilt driven societies**

The Western tradition of guilt that Nietzsche addresses is not merely a religious doctrine or personal feeling; it is the product of centuries of institutional design. Medieval Christianity oversaw a cultural transition from a shame-based to a guilt-

based moral system in Western Europe. While shame operates in the public sphere (i.e., fear of social dishonour), guilt is internal, requiring the individual to interiorize sin and experience self-reproach even in private thought (Delumeau, 1990, pp. 2–5). This transformation did not occur spontaneously; it was engineered by the Catholic Church, especially through the apparatus of penance, confession, and pastoral surveillance. The Church restructured Christian subjectivity around fear of divine judgment, making sin and guilt the central emotional coordinates of spiritual life.

Following the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, annual auricular confession became mandatory for all Christians. This institutional innovation had a profound psychological effect: individuals were expected to examine their consciences regularly, confess their sins to a priest, and seek absolution. The confessional became a ritual technology for producing guilt (Delumeau, 1990, pp. 116–120).

Priests were trained using confession manuals that listed possible sins across sexuality, thought, speech, appetite, and intention—virtually all aspects of life. By promoting scrupulous examination of conscience, these manuals encouraged the internalization of moral surveillance and transformed everyday behaviour into a potential site of guilt. Confession was not only about forgiveness; it was also about shaping moral subjectivity through a repetitive cycle of sin, guilt, and penance.

In *Sin and Fear: The Emergence of a Western Guilt Culture, 13th–18th Centuries*, Delumeau (1990) documents how the Church used fear as an instrument of pastoral governance. Through sermons, paintings, plays, liturgical texts, and—as I analyze later—the architecture of churches, the faithful were constantly reminded of the torments of hell, the severity of divine judgment, and the omnipresence of sin.

This moral pedagogy saturated European consciousness with images of death and punishment, particularly from the 13th century onward. In popular religion and elite theology alike, fear of sin became inseparable from fear of eternal damnation (Delumeau, 1990, pp. 187–221). Such terror served to discipline behaviour and secure ecclesiastical authority. Fear and guilt thus operated as biopolitical tools long before modern state institutions assumed similar roles.

It is important to note that guilt culture in Catholic Europe was gendered. Women were frequently portrayed as more susceptible to temptation, morally frail, and catalysts of male sin—sources of sexual danger, unjustified targets of suspicion, and exemplars of penitent suffering. The result was a gendered distribution of guilt, with female bodies seen as sites of sin and women disproportionately subjected to moral scrutiny, ascetic discipline, and public penitence.

By the 17th and 18th centuries, some Enlightenment thinkers began to critique the Church's monopoly on guilt and its excessive moralism. However, as Nietzsche later noted, secular culture inherited the emotional structure of Christianity even after its metaphysical foundations were questioned. The individualized conscience, the moralization of suffering, and the belief in self-perfection through self-blame did not

disappear. Thus, even in Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment contexts, the psychological infrastructure of guilt constructed by centuries of Christian pastoral care remained intact.

### **Guilt as a fetish**

In psychoanalytic and Marxist traditions, a fetish is an object or affect that carries excessive investment, serving as a substitute that allows the subject to disavow or avoid confronting a deeper truth. In Marx, this appears as commodity fetishism, where social relations between people are displaced onto relations between things, granting commodities an illusory autonomy (Marx, 1867/1990). In Freud, fetishism is a psychic mechanism of both repression and enjoyment, where attachment to a substitute object masks castration anxiety while simultaneously producing satisfaction (Freud, 1927/1961). Both traditions show how a fetish is not simply a false belief but a structural displacement: subjects “know very well” that the object lacks the attributed power, yet act as if it possesses it. Applied to guilt, the concept of fetish highlights how guilt can become detached from real transgressions, functioning instead as a self-sustaining structure that subjects cling to as both punishment and consolation (Žižek, 1989).

Nietzsche’s concept of bad conscience anticipates the fetishistic logic of guilt. In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, he argues that guilt emerges as a reaction formation—an internalization of aggressive drives that cannot be acted upon. The guilty subject begins to enjoy suffering, turning pain into moral capital. Nietzsche suggests that guilt serves as a self-justifying affect: the more we suffer, the more virtuous we believe ourselves to be. This dynamic lays the groundwork for masochistic or fetishistic attachments to guilt: “Man would rather will nothingness than not will at all” (Nietzsche, 2007, II.18). This “will to guilt” turns the subject inward, creating a perverse gratification in moral suffering.

Freud radicalized Nietzsche’s insight by locating guilt at the centre of civilization’s psychic economy. In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (Freud, 2010), he argues that guilt emerges from the conflict between instinctual drives and social demands, embodied in the superego’s punitive force. Crucially, the superego punishes not only for deeds committed but also for forbidden wishes. As a result, guilt becomes unmoored from actual transgression, turning into a pervasive feeling of unworthiness—“civilization imposes this sacrifice upon us for our very existence” (Freud, 2010, p. 87). In this way, guilt becomes fetishized: no longer a response to specific acts, it becomes a free-floating psychic object, a symptom that organizes subjectivity and perversely satisfies the superego through self-reproach.

Žižek extends this by embedding guilt in the structure of fetishistic disavowal. Individuals can acknowledge wrongdoing on one level while persisting in it on another—the formula: “I know very well, but nonetheless...” (Žižek, 2008, pp. 59–

61). Guilt functions as a fetishistic screen: it allows subjects to feel morally aware without altering behaviour. Far from deterring, guilt provides a mode of enjoyment (*jouissance*), as the superego demands not the cessation of guilt but its endless repetition (Žižek, 1989). Modern secular societies remain saturated with guilt even without theological frameworks: guilt becomes a cultural form, detached from transcendence yet indispensable to subjectivity.

In contemporary analyses of neoliberal capitalism, the connection to Marx's commodity fetishism becomes apparent. Maurizio Lazzarato (2012) argues in *The Making of the Indebted Man* that modern subjectivity is structured by debt, where economic obligations permeate moral life. Debt functions as a new kind of fetishized guilt: individuals internalize the creditor–debtor relation so deeply that indebtedness appears as an ontological condition rather than a social arrangement. Just as Marx noted that commodities appear to have inherent value independent of labour, Lazzarato shows how debt appears as a naturalized moral relation, producing guilty subjects who view repayment as a moral duty. In this sense, guilt becomes a fetish of late capitalism: a structure that individuals know to be constructed yet nonetheless inhabit as if it were immutable.

### **Collective guilt**

The fetishization of guilt does not stop at individual psychology or the superego's demands. In the Western tradition, guilt has also become a collective cultural form, shaping how modern societies understand their past, their political responsibilities, and their global role. Especially after the Second World War, a new modality emerged: collective, historical guilt. In Germany and France, for example, national identity became tied to acknowledging past atrocities (e.g., the Holocaust, colonialism). This guilt was seen as a moral duty to remember and atone. Memorial culture, public apologies, and educational curricula assumed the role of institutions of historical conscience.

Post-war Germany is a prime example. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (“coming to terms with the past”) became a defining project of the Federal Republic. Through war crimes trials, reparations to Holocaust survivors, and later a vast memory culture of monuments, museums, and education, guilt was transformed into a civic duty (Moses, 2007). This was not only an ethical reckoning but also a political strategy: the open acknowledgment of guilt became the foundation for Germany's reintegration into the international community. In this sense, guilt was institutionalized, ritualized, and sustained across generations.

This process resonates with Nietzsche's and Freud's accounts of guilt as excessive and self-perpetuating. As Freud (2010) argued, guilt can persist even without direct transgression, since the superego punishes desires as much as deeds. In collective memory, younger generations may feel guilty for crimes they did not commit,

sustaining what Jaspers (2001) called “metaphysical guilt.” Even when individuals know they are not personally responsible, they nonetheless inhabit a position of collective culpability, repeating acts of contrition to maintain both moral legitimacy and a paradoxical form of collective identity.

However, in *The Tyranny of Guilt* (Bruckner, 2010), Pascal Bruckner argues that this kind of guilt has turned into a self-flagellating ideology. Historical atrocities such as colonialism, slavery, and genocide have produced an enduring moral debt that Western cultures continually reaffirm. Rather than functioning as a transformative acknowledgment of historical wrongs, guilt becomes a fetish: a repetitive and often sterile ritual that provides moral satisfaction while displacing more difficult questions of responsibility and action.

This echoes the psychoanalytic and philosophical dynamics already discussed. Just as Freud argued that guilt can detach from concrete actions, and Žižek showed how it can serve as a fetishistic disavowal, Bruckner contends that Western guilt operates less as a catalyst for justice than as a moral posture. He describes it as a form of “Western masochism,” where societies take on the role of perpetual debtor, continually rehearsing their crimes to derive a paradoxical sense of moral superiority from self-condemnation (Bruckner, 2010). This does not deny the importance of acknowledging historical wrongs; rather, it exposes how fetishized guilt can neutralize its transformative potential. When guilt is endlessly rehearsed without being resolved, it risks becoming an ideological comfort: the West “pays” its moral debt symbolically, through rituals of contrition, while avoiding deeper structural change. The more we confess and apologize, the more we sustain the very system of guilt that demands endless repetition.

Bruckner is a controversial figure because of his often Islamophobic, anti-immigration, and anti-feminist positions, which provide intellectual cover for parts of the far and alt-right. Nonetheless, his critique targets not remembrance itself but the ritualization of guilt that can substitute for substantive change.

### **Coping with guilt**

Guilt is inherently uncomfortable and, like other powerful affects, humans develop strategies to manage, avoid, or displace it. Psychoanalysis, beginning with Freud, emphasizes that guilt signals internal conflict between desire and socialized moral standards, often experienced as anxiety or psychic pain. To cope, individuals employ defence mechanisms and psychological strategies that protect the ego from intolerable emotional stress.

One primary strategy is **repression** or complete **denial**, in which guilt-inducing thoughts or desires are pushed out of conscious awareness. Freud (2010) observed that individuals often feel guilty without a direct cause, because the superego

punishes unconscious wishes. By repressing the awareness of these desires, the individual reduces conscious anxiety, though the psychic energy associated with guilt remains active, often resurfacing in dreams, slips, or neurotic symptoms.

Closely related is **displacement**, whereby guilt is projected onto external objects, people, or situations. A simple example is someone yelling at family after a bad day at work. More broadly, the subject acknowledges wrongdoing or complicity but displaces the emotional weight of guilt onto symbolic acts or surrogate objects—excessive charitable donations, ritualized public apologies, or adherence to moral norms that do not resolve the original conflict. The result is a management of guilt that preserves the appearance of ethical awareness while avoiding confrontation with underlying personal or structural responsibility.

Confronted with intolerable moral conflict, the individual may regress to more childlike modes of thought and behaviour, which feel safer and less burdened by responsibility. In psychoanalytic theory, **regression** refers to the reversion to earlier stages of psychological development when faced with overwhelming stress, anxiety, or guilt (Freud, 1964). When guilt becomes unbearable, regression may manifest as childlike denial of responsibility (“It wasn’t me!”) or excessive dependence on authority figures (parents, teachers, religious leaders) to absolve guilt, resembling childhood reliance on caretakers for moral guidance.

Another strategy is **rationalization**, which allows individuals to reinterpret their actions or omissions to mitigate the sense of wrongdoing. By reframing transgressions as necessary, unavoidable, or morally neutral, guilt is neutralized cognitively even if the superego continues to signal moral failure. Similarly **institutionalization** can codify guilt through law in a way that channels ethical responsibility into structured formats.

As noted earlier, Nietzsche focuses on asceticism as the priestly “remedy” for guilt, suggesting that individuals can derive satisfaction from suffering. This **masochistic enjoyment** transforms guilt into something meaningful, with punishment becoming a form of moral confirmation. In psychoanalysis, moral masochism names a pattern in which guilt, suffering, or self-punishment are not merely endured but unconsciously sought, preserved, or even enjoyed because they serve intrapsychic functions (self-atonement, identity formation, psychic consistency). Unlike sexual masochism, moral masochism is primarily ethical/affective: the subject treats suffering or perpetual penitence as evidence of moral worth or as the price one must pay to be “good.” Clinically, it appears as chronic self-reproach, repeated self-sabotage, and a compulsion to take responsibility or blame beyond what circumstances warrant (Gabbard, 2005; Vaillant, 1992).

**Projection** is a classical defence mechanism in psychoanalysis in which an individual attributes unwanted thoughts, impulses, or feelings—such as guilt—to another person or external object. In the context of guilt, projection allows the

subject to avoid direct confrontation with internalized moral conflict. When the intensity of guilt becomes psychologically threatening, projection enables the individual to shift the emotional burden onto someone or something outside themselves. For example, a person who feels guilty for envy or resentment toward a colleague may perceive that the colleague is actually envious or hostile toward them. This externalization temporarily alleviates the internal tension by recasting the moral conflict as something “out there” rather than within, allowing the ego to maintain a coherent self-image.

**Sublimation** in contrast, is considered a “mature” defence mechanism (Vaillant, 1992). Freud (1957) defined sublimation as redirecting unacceptable drives, often bound up with guilt, into socially or culturally valued pursuits such as art, science, or creativity. Instead of repressing or externalizing guilt, sublimation transforms its underlying energies into productive forms of expression—for example, channelling aggressive impulses into sport, activism, or artistic creation.

### 3. Architecture and Guilt

Based on the foregoing analysis, guilt is not a singular emotion but a constellation of affects and practices that function at multiple levels within individuals and societies. Guilt can manifest as an inner psychological burden, a collective moral narrative, or a disciplinary mechanism shaping social conduct. These complex and multifaceted functions are sustained by infrastructures—ritual, institutional, and material—that regulate and institutionalize them. In this sense, architecture and urban planning, whether intentionally or not, become part of the apparatus through which guilt is managed and distributed.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, guilt is deeply bound up with social and spatial dynamics. Freud (2010), in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, described guilt as the affect produced by the internalization of cultural prohibitions. Its force is not merely internal but tied to the presence or imagined gaze of others, making guilt inseparable from dynamics of visibility and exposure. Melanie Klein (1948) expanded this analysis by framing guilt as a relational affect: it arises in the subject’s fear of having damaged or disappointed valued others and can be mitigated through fantasies of reparation. Both Freud and Klein suggest that guilt is never experienced in isolation but is mediated by relations and contexts that architecture and planning produce.

Alberto Vanolo (2021) brings these psychoanalytic insights into dialogue with social geography, planning, and architecture. He argues that shame and guilt are actively produced through spatial dynamics—visibility, proximity, distance, and boundary-making—and that urban space operates as an affective infrastructure. Using

examples such as commodity consumption (department stores as sites of consumerism's guilt regulation) and sex work (zoning of sex-work areas), Vanolo shows how spatial arrangements—places of concealment, zones of exposure, and forms of mimesis—enable, intensify, or attenuate guilt and shame.

Guilt is inseparable from dynamics of visibility, concealment, and boundary-making: exposure tends to intensify shame, while guilt often emerges from transgressions tied to proximity, relationality, and internalized expectations of others. Urban space therefore becomes an affective infrastructure where design decisions about privacy, distance, surveillance, and accessibility condition how guilt is experienced. Spatial mechanisms include exposure versus concealment, boundaries and distance, and temporal or narrative spaces. For example, architecture that maximizes visibility can intensify guilt or shame by exposing individuals to the gaze of others, while spaces of concealment can diminish such affects by providing opportunities for privacy or secrecy.

Despite these insights, the role of architecture in regulating guilt remains underexamined. While there is extensive literature on guilt in philosophy, theology, and psychoanalysis, and while architectural studies have explored related concepts, the active regulation of guilt through architecture has rarely been addressed systematically. This gap means that many architectural mechanisms of guilt regulation are indirect or unintentional and can even stem from the designer's own sense of ethical or moral responsibility, which can operate as a projection of guilt into the spatial environment.

My argument is that architecture and urban planning can intensify, diminish, or displace guilt through spatial arrangements (scale, visibility, zoning) and particular aesthetic choices. To understand this relation more fully, I examine cases where guilt regulation becomes an important part of spatial configuration, either because of the programme itself or due to design and planning strategies. My goal is to identify the tools and methods through which architecture can achieve designed—and potentially even predictable—modes of guilt regulation.

My reading of “architecture as guilt regulation” is indebted to affect theory. An affect is a non-conscious, pre-personal intensity that represents a body's capacity to act and be affected by its environment, preceding conscious emotion and thought (Massumi, 2002). Affect is not a fixed feeling but a dynamic flow of energy, an ongoing process of “worlding” where points of intensity, lines of variation, and context interact to shift understanding and enable new actions. Built environments are thus not inert containers but affective infrastructures, composing “atmospheres” that prime appraisal and conduct. The case studies that follow read their spatial logics as distinct affective arrangements that tune these dimensions to different moral ends.

## Story #1

*Can you tell me a story that you witnessed/ experienced in Amsterdam that could be considered guilty and/or immoral and/or sinful especially if it were to happen outside Amsterdam. Think of something that is tied to an institution, event or place of the city and/or happened in the public realm.*

With my sister and some friends, we went to a bar in Amsterdam-Noord where one of the rooms was a big space filled with bean bags. While being drunk there and taking ketamine, my friend and I were hanging out in them and quite soon started talking about wanting to have these at home.

My friend suddenly realised we were sitting close to the emergency exit. She opened it and, after noticing that there was no alarm or anything else that could bust us, we threw two of the bean bags outside, which was next to the parking lot of the bar. We then closed the emergency doors again. After that, my sister and I decided to take them back to the flat we were sharing at the time.

My sister arranged a taxi, which barely fit her and one of the bean bags. These were huge, but I still hoped both would fit in the taxi. So I decided to take the other one back home on the handlebar of my bike.

The bar was on the waterfront of Amsterdam, and the closest ferry back to Central Station passed across this water, which was quite visible from the bar's terrace. To this day, I still don't understand how, after taking ketamine, I actually dared to steal those bags and just throw them through the emergency exit. But at the same time, the drugs made me paranoid enough to bike all the way to the other side of Amsterdam-Noord, just to avoid taking a ferry where I'd be visible to anyone from the bar. Like they'd still be able to stop me at that point.

What happened on the actual ferry, once I arrived at Amsterdam Central, was that because the bean bag made me quite slow, I was the last to get off. Before I could do that, some girls on a scooter tried to board already. But again, this bean bag was huge, and not only could I not swerve away, I also couldn't brake, which made one of the girls crash into the bean bag and tip over.

Since it was on the front of the bike, I couldn't see her at that point anymore. I only heard her cursing in Dutch at me, which I found super hilarious, and I decided to just keep on moving.

The fact that I was even physically able to bike all the way home without crashing still fascinates me to this day.

E.

## The church

The Christian church has historically functioned as an apparatus for the production and regulation of guilt. Rooted in the theological framework of original sin and the moral debt owed to God, ecclesiastical architecture was designed not only as a space for worship but also as an environment that continually reminds individuals of their fallen condition and dependence on divine forgiveness (Delumeau, 1990). The church thus becomes an affective infrastructure where spatial arrangements and ritualized practices intensify guilt, orient it toward God, and provide carefully staged avenues for its ritual discharge.

Scale plays a crucial role. The monumental proportions of cathedrals—with towering naves, expansive vaults, and spires—create a visceral experience of smallness and insignificance in the individual believer. Standing in the shadow of the divine order embodied by architecture, the subject is physically and symbolically reminded of their humble, sinful status (Borch, 2014). The manipulation of light further accentuates this experience. Dramatic chiaroscuro effects, filtered through stained glass, stage a theological narrative in which illumination signifies divine grace and darkness represents sin and estrangement. The interplay of scale and light envelops the believer in a dramaturgy of guilt, where their own existence is cast against the immeasurable magnitude of God.

Decorative programmes reinforce this architecture of moral affect. Sculptures, frescoes, and stained-glass windows often depict biblical scenes of judgment, suffering, or penance. These visual narratives function as constant reminders of human fallibility and divine punishment, ensuring that the believer's guilt remains present in the spatial experience (Panofsky, 1951). They also create a pedagogical environment in which guilt is transmitted intergenerationally, visually inscribing theological concepts into the spatial fabric of everyday worship.

Ecclesiastical acoustics—long reverberation times produced by stone vaults and large volumes—blur ordinary speech while magnifying organ tones and chant. This spectral elongation of sound diminishes conversational intelligibility and induces collective quietude, aligning bodily comportment with liturgical solemnity. The aural environment thus operates as an atmospheric regulator: a technology that dampens profane chatter, amplifies ritual voice, and folds listeners into a shared sonic field of humility and awe (Borch, 2014).

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Finally, restricted areas of the church such as sanctuaries, choirs and sacristies are only accessible to clergy, reinforce hierarchical distinctions that mirror theological claims. By excluding the laity from sacred zones, architecture dramatizes the believer's distance from God and their dependence on clerical mediation. This spatial hierarchy inscribes guilt into movement and access, conditioning worshippers to recognize both their exclusion and the necessity of ritualized reparation.

Across history, these strategies have been deployed differently: Gothic cathedrals, with their verticality and austere sublimity, emphasize transcendence and distance, while Baroque churches immerse the believer in sensory spectacle, overwhelming them with visual and emotional intensity (Panofsky, 1951; Buci-Glucksmann, 1994). Yet both styles operate within the same logic of intensifying guilt and choreographing its ritual management.

Taken together, these elements show how the church operates as an architectural apparatus that does not merely house religious practice but actively structures the believer's relation to guilt. Scale, light, decoration, confession, and restricted access combine to create a spatial dramaturgy in which guilt is intensified, continually remembered, and ritually managed.

## **A Night in Church**

It's just past midnight. There's a small line of people waiting to get in. Most of them are dressed quite conventionally, which contrasts with some of the people smoking on the sidewalk. The bouncer seems to know many of the regulars and a lot of the people living in the neighbourhood. In front of us, there are three men who look like tourists. The bouncer asks them if they know what Church is and what they're looking for. The men seem well-informed, which satisfies the bouncer. He reminds them that they need to be respectful, and then lets them in.

Then it's our turn. My friends know the bouncer, and they have a friendly chat in Dutch that I don't fully understand. He tells us that if we decide to go completely naked, we won't have to pay an entrance fee. We pay for our tickets, then they stamp our hands with a Church-branded stamp and give us hangers for our coats and sweaters, which we hand over to the cloakroom.

After we enter, I go to the bar to order beers for myself and my friends. The bartender is wearing a jockstrap and a Greek army hat, so I ask him if he's Greek. He is, and he tells me he's been working at Church for two years.

I then take some time to observe the space and the people. On the ground floor, there's the main stage, a bar, a podium, and a pole. A screen is playing gay porn, and there are quite a few Christian references: various crosses, paintings, sculptures, and even a small memorial dedicated to someone I didn't know. There's

also a basement and a balcony that I'll explore later. The crowd is, surprisingly to me, very diverse: old and young, locals and tourists. It's a night with no strict dress code, so some people are dressed casually, others more extravagantly. Some are in fetishwear, some in underwear, and others completely naked. There are also some women, which I hadn't expected. The music is techno, and the vibe on the main stage is fun and flirty, but not vulgar. Everyone is dancing.

After my first beer, I decide it's time to explore the rest of the space. I head to the basement. In typical Amsterdam fashion, the stairs are quite steep. The first thing I notice, aside from the urinals and stalls, is a hybrid sink with a strange faucet called the "dickwasher," as well as a shower installation with instructions on how to douche an anus. Next to the toilets, there is a corridor with small sex cabins reminiscent of fitting rooms. The last cabin is slightly larger and has a latex swing. At the end of the corridor, there is a big cross with a moving light installation. Nearby is a small hall with benches where a few people are sitting and talking. Across from the toilets and behind the stairs is a darkroom. I enter, feeling a bit scared as it's really dark. I can barely see. I bump into a piece of furniture in the middle that feels like a round couch, something you'd find in a waiting room. I feel a hand touching me. I almost panic. I push the hand away and say a quick "No, thank you." At that moment, someone's phone lights up, and I get a better glimpse of the space. There seem to be three people there. I've had enough of the basement for now. Time to go back to the main stage to find my friends.

By the time I get upstairs, a drag show is happening. The atmosphere is cheerful, and the performance is really funny. My friends want to go out for a smoke, so I follow them. As we're chatting, a straight couple in their sixties starts talking to us. I don't really understand what they're saying, as it's in Dutch, but it seems friendly. My friends later tell me that the couple asked if we'd be interested in watching them have sex. Some of the people on the smoke break are also browsing hookup apps. I notice that across the street there's a sex shop, a coffeeshop, a hotel, a pizza place, and a café. We go back inside by showing the stamp on our hands.

After some more dancing at the main stage, I decide to check out the upstairs. There's a balcony overlooking the stage where a few people are talking. At the end of the balcony, there is a wide couch where some people are having sex while others are watching. I feel slightly uncomfortable watching for too long, so I explore the rest of the area. There are two swings that resemble butterfly chairs. Behind them is a darker space, partitioned by thin wooden walls, which feels more like a maze. As I navigate it, I come across some people having sex. Because the space is so narrow, I have to bump into them to pass. They try to invite me to join by touching me, but I quickly move past them. The walls have glory holes in different spots, but no one is using them at the moment. I think I've now seen all the spaces, so I go to find my friends again.

While I'm dancing, a guy starts talking to me. He's a tourist from Los Angeles. He seems fascinated by the place, so I ask him how he likes it. He tells me he loves how free and cool everyone is, and that there's nothing like this in LA. He says Church isn't just about cruising, sex, or dancing, but about people coexisting and having fun. I nod in agreement and ask how he found out about it. He says he was at a bar on Reguliersdwarstraat, where some locals recommended it. After dancing with him for a while, he asks if I have any drugs. I say no, and he quickly loses interest and starts approaching others.

By the time I'm done talking with him, my friends are already flirting with people. I don't want to interrupt, so I decide to walk around again and see if anything has changed. I'm feeling a bit tipsy now, so maybe I'll perceive things differently as I let my guard down. I head downstairs and sit on one of the benches. I take out my phone and start jotting down notes so I don't forget anything. As I'm doing this, an older couple, who seem heterosexual, sit across from me. They're talking in Dutch, and I don't understand at first, but then I realise they're addressing me. They switch to English and ask if I'm okay, saying it seems wrong that I'm on my phone instead of enjoying myself. I assure them I'm fine, and we start chatting. When I tell them I'm Greek, they start telling me about their vacations there, which feels like pretty typical small talk. As we talk, they pull out several small drug bags and seem to be deciding what to take. They ask me what I'm doing in Amsterdam, so I tell them I study architecture at TU Delft. They seem surprised, and the man tells me he studied electrical engineering at the TU, then launches into the also quite typical TU Delft superiority talk and his amazing, high-profile job.

I find myself even more surprised by the fact that someone like him is hanging out at Church. He didn't fit the stereotypical profile I had in mind for guests in such places. As we keep talking and I feel more comfortable, I ask if they're a couple. They laugh and say they're good friends and fuckbuddies, but not a couple. All this is happening while they're making lines of drugs on their phone, which they sniff openly in front of me. They pass me the phone with two lines left and a twenty-euro bill, saying it's 3-MMC. I politely decline their offer and decide to leave my comfy spot. I guess I feel a bit guilty for not taking their drugs.

After a quick stop at the darkroom, which is now really busy and where I can see the silhouettes of people having sex, I decide to check the balcony again, which had felt less intimidating before. As I walk there, I notice that the vibe has shifted more towards cruising and sex. On the balcony, all the couches are occupied by people making out, having sex, or clearly looking for it. Where people are having sex, there's often a small crowd watching, some masturbating. I find the openness fascinating, but I also notice that the sex feels mechanical and lacking in intimacy. It's like being on the set of a porn film, where everyone is programmed to perform but without emotion. As I try to get comfortable in my new role as a voyeur, I sometimes feel sad, almost guilty, for the people engaging in this detached kind of

sex, which doesn't seem all that desirable to me. Then I realise that this feeling says more about me than about them. I was projecting my own moral ideas about what sex "should" be. At least my research about guilt is casting new light on how I handle moral judgments.

As I navigate the conflicting emotions of being in a space where sex is viewed very differently from what I'm used to, I notice that the initial shock is wearing off. I'm becoming quite desensitised. But then I see one of my friends having sex with someone. I'm not ready for that, so I head back to the main stage. The older woman I was speaking with earlier is now pole dancing, completely naked. I find it quite charming, especially since a crowd of young queer people is cheering her on. I join the crowd and dance for a while. But it's getting late, and I'm tired, so I decide to find my friends and tell them I'd like to leave. Coincidentally, that's also when Church is closing. They flash bright lights, even in the dark areas, to make people aware. I find it funny, especially in the darkroom, where some people seem quite shocked, even appalled, to see who they were hooking up with.

I finally find my friends, and we queue to get our coats. While chatting, a guy approaches us and asks my friend if I'm his boyfriend. To my surprise, my friend says yes and gives me a funny look. I decide to play along, and after a couple of silly jokes, the guy asks if we want to follow him to the gay sauna. My friend asks me what I think, and I tell him I'm too tired for anything else. He agrees and tells the guy we're heading home. The guy doesn't seem to take no for an answer and asks if he can join us at home or if we want to go to his place. After some back-and-forth, I get annoyed and tell him, politely but firmly, that nothing is going to happen tonight. He leaves, and my friend thanks me, saying the guy was pressuring him and that he thought pretending I was his boyfriend would help deter him.

Most people in the queue are on Grindr, which I find odd, since I assume most of them already had their fair share of fun. As we exit Church, many are smoking outside, talking about afterparties, the gay sauna, hooking up, and walking to the Rosarium in Vondelpark. It really feels like they can't get enough. I take some time on the street to finish my observation notes while my friends finish their cigarettes.

It's around 5:30, and the city is empty as I say goodbye to my friends and walk towards my bike.

## **The prison**

If the church regulates guilt toward God, the modern prison institutionalizes guilt toward society. Ecclesiastical architecture inscribes guilt into theological narratives of sin and redemption; the prison embodies the secular transformation of guilt into a juridical and disciplinary framework. The individual is no longer guilty before the divine but before the collective body represented by law (Foucault, 1977).

This logic resonates with Nietzsche's account of guilt as inseparable from debt. Crime is conceived as a debt owed to society, and punishment becomes a way of repaying it—an exchange in which the suffering of the guilty compensates for the violation of social norms. The prison, in this sense, is the architectural materialization of Nietzsche's thesis: the place where debt is spatially enforced, temporally extended, and ritually repaid.

Foucault's analysis in *Discipline and Punish* (1977) shows that the prison is not a neutral container for punishment but a spatial technology producing subjects who internalize their guilt through constant surveillance. The Panopticon, with its centralized gaze, exemplifies this architecture of guilt: the possibility of constant observation induces the prisoner to self-regulate, transforming guilt into a permanent condition of self-monitoring.

Beyond surveillance, the materials of the prison enforce guilt through their physicality. Iron bars, barbed wire, and reinforced concrete create a hostile environment of containment. Cold materials, muted colours, and harsh lighting communicate deprivation, signalling that the prisoner has forfeited access to the sensorial richness of ordinary life. Corridors and cells are narrow, repetitive, and monotonous, reflecting the reduction of individuality into uniformity. These spatial and material choices do not simply secure bodies; they continually remind prisoners of their guilt by making the environment itself punitive.

Equally important is the organization of monotonous routines. From cell layout to dining halls and yards, architectural configurations support daily repetition of controlled actions. Minimal furnishings reinforce deprivation and erase signs of individuality. Refectories arranged in rows facilitate surveillance and orderly consumption, disciplining even eating. The yard, ostensibly a site of freedom, is a walled rectangle that channels movement into repetitive patterns, closely timed and monitored. Architecture thus not only spatializes guilt but temporalizes it, embedding punishment in the rhythms of daily life.

The prison also redistributes guilt across society. By confining the "guilty" to a demarcated zone, it allows the rest of the community to displace anxieties about crime and morality. Ordinary citizens feel safer precisely because guilt is spatially contained and hidden from view. This echoes Vanolo's (2021) account of how shame and guilt are mediated by urban zoning and boundary-making: the prison concentrates and externalizes guilt, enabling society to sustain the illusion of innocence by relegating transgression to an enclosed site.

Prisons operate differently across contexts. In many Latin American prisons, overcrowding and inhumane conditions transform guilt into collective suffering, reinforcing punishment through deprivation and violence (Darke, 2013). By contrast, many Scandinavian prisons prioritize natural light, wood, and art, emphasizing dignity and reintegration (Pratt, 2008). Instead of amplifying guilt, such prisons seek

to redirect it toward reflection and social repair. These contrasts show how the architectural regulation of guilt ranges from intensification and degradation to mitigation and transformation, depending on the moral and political philosophies embedded in design.

## **The monument**

In the aftermath of the World Wars, societies confronted unprecedented violence and atrocity. Guilt and responsibility, whether collective or individual, became central in public life, not only in moral or legal terms but also in the symbolic ordering of space. Memorials and monuments emerged as architectural instruments through which societies could negotiate their relationship with the past, transforming guilt into remembrance, mourning, or displacement.

Monuments regulate guilt through scale, materiality, and abstraction. Large-scale memorials—such as Peter Eisenman’s *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* in Berlin—aim to confront visitors with disorientation, repetition, and loss, creating an atmosphere where guilt and grief become spatial experiences. Monumental scale can humble individuals, making them feel small before the weight of historical crimes, much as churches induce humility before God. Conversely, smaller, intimate memorials regulate guilt by dispersing it into the urban fabric, embedding remembrance in everyday routines (Young, 1993).

Materials carry symbolic weight: stone and concrete suggest permanence, conveying the unerasable presence of past guilt. Reflective surfaces—polished steel, water—implicate the viewer by returning their gaze, folding the present into remembrance (Huysen, 2003). The tactile qualities of these materials invite confrontation but can also create distance: coldness, hardness, and abstraction allow societies to monumentalize guilt, fixing it in stone and displacing the emotional burden from the living onto the symbolic object.

Abstraction and symbolism are central. Rather than depicting perpetrators or victims directly, many post-WWII memorials use simple forms, voids, and repetitions that evoke absence and loss. Pierre Nora’s concept of *lieux de mémoire* (1989) captures this: as lived memory fades, societies construct symbolic sites to embody what risks being forgotten. Monuments thus act as repositories where guilt is deposited and ritualized, often universalizing responsibility while displacing it from concrete actors onto abstract memory.

Under Bruckner’s reading of Western guilt, monuments can be understood as spatial manifestations of Western masochism. They allow societies to externalize and ritualize guilt, while providing a socially sanctioned outlet for moral anxiety. Repeated remembrance transforms guilt into performative experience that can be

morally gratifying, allowing societies to feel they are confronting their past even as the burden is partially displaced onto architecture.

Symbolism is not static. Over time, political and cultural changes can reconfigure a monument's meaning. Structures that once served as instruments of guilt or atonement can become contested spaces, symbols of oppression, or rallying points for protest. Post-communist countries, for example, debate, remove, or reinterpret monuments erected to celebrate ideological figures. Public monuments thus become arenas for political tension, reflecting struggles over how guilt, responsibility, and memory are distributed and represented (Young, 1993; Huysen, 2003).

Memorials also stage ritualized atonement. Commemorations, wreath-laying, and national ceremonies transform guilt into cyclical practices of remembrance, where architecture provides the stage for collective rituals. Yet this ritualization can dull affective charge, turning guilt into an obligation fulfilled through repetition. Young (1993) suggests that memorials are always "counter-monuments": they both preserve memory and risk neutralizing it by institutionalizing remembrance.

### **King's Day in Amsterdam**

It is my first King's Day in Amsterdam. It is also my first ever experience of King's Day in general, as in previous years I was staying at home. It's 11:00 and I am biking towards the centre. I really don't know what to expect, mostly because some people have told me it's best to avoid it as it's too crowded and overwhelming, while others were really looking forward to it.

I am almost at Marnixstraat, biking on De Clercqstraat, and I realise that the first difficulty will be to park my bike. The centre has been cut off for bikes and the nearby streets are full of them. Finding a proper place to lock it takes me around ten minutes of searching. I enter the centre via Rozengracht, where it's already packed with people. I need to walk until Westerkerk where I am supposed to meet my friends. As I make my way through the crowd I start to feel like I don't really fit in, because of my black outfit and, more importantly, my lack of any orange accessory. The music background changes every few metres as different stores or stands have their own music and DJs.

I take a quick detour into the streets of Jordaan where a lot of people are selling all kinds of things: from homemade food and drinks to clothes and toys, and even access to their house toilet for a fee.

When I make it to Westerkerk my second quest is to find my friends who are partying at the Homomonument. For some reason, most probably because of the huge crowds, my phone does not seem to have any network connection, so I can't text or call them to help me locate them. While I keep wandering through the crowd a woman with a makeup crayon paints a Dutch flag on my cheek. A moment after

that I see an orange necklace resembling flowers on the pavement. I pick it up and wear it as well. I guess this makes me fit in better! Finally, I see one of my friends at the bar getting beers. Mission accomplished. I join the rest of them and start drinking beer I brought from home. I have a backpack full of them.

The vibe of the party is fun, maybe a bit tacky for my taste. There is quite a large stage and kiosks working as bars installed behind Westerkerk. While it's just past midday everyone already seems kind of drunk. The crowd seems mostly queer. While we are dancing, two people right behind us get into a fistfight. I am shocked as this really seems to happen out of nowhere. They fall to the ground with people trying to separate them. After a few seconds the fight is over and the people involved leave with blood on their faces. I start wondering why people would get into a physical fight at a queer street party. It seems absurd. My friends are sure it is because of cocaine.

After some time I need to go to the toilet. The nearest ones are the urinals next to the Homomonument. There is a big waiting line so I decide to wait there. Thankfully the line moves pretty quickly, but as I get closer to the urinals the smell gets worse and worse. It is almost unbearable. When I get inside it is even worse. The urinals are clogged and there is a pool of urine that is impossible to avoid stepping in. But at this point it's too late to change my mind and leave, so I try to overcome my utter disgust and get it over with. As I leave I am thinking that I am not going there again.

After some more partying I feel like I want to explore more of the city centre to see what is happening on other streets. Some of my friends want to follow while others prefer to stay and meet us later. With the ones who leave, we decide to get some kind of lunch from the Albert Heijn near Dam Square. I go in and I have never seen a supermarket so busy. There is also a limit on how many beers one can buy but nobody seems to enforce it. I get my snacks from the bakery and, as I am going to the self-checkout desks, I realise that a lot of people are basically looting, just leaving the store with stuff without even pretending to scan it.

We sit next to the canal on Singel to have our lunch, enjoy the sun and rest for a bit. While there, there is an almost constant flow of people urinating either next to us or across from us in the canal, without seemingly minding us. There are also a lot of boats hosting parties, or small groups of people. At one point two of them almost crash and their drivers start shouting at each other. There is also police on jet skis who look like they enjoy the attention they get from the crowd, even posing for pictures.

After we are done with our lunch and rest we start walking on Spuistraat. There is a live concert on the street outside Café The Minds which seems fun. It's a Dutch punk band playing. The crowd there is quite different, more punk and metal, definitely more my vibe. I really enjoy it. I even get into a mosh pit for a bit, thankfully without getting hurt. After this band there is another, more metal, band

which I also really enjoy. Right behind us there are a few temporary urinals which, while still disgusting and dirty, are much better than the ones before.

We stay there for quite some time and then decide to go back to the Homomonument to rejoin the rest so we can figure out what to do next. The vibe there is pretty similar, but people seem even more drunk than before. The rest of the friends now also want to leave so we decide to explore a bit more. We end up again on Spuistraat near Torensuis at what seems like a house techno party taking over the street. It is fun and we accidentally meet another group of friends as well. Somehow a car with German licence plates ends up on the street and wants to cross the blocked street. The people dancing don't seem to care and they don't really make way. I can see the frustration of the driver, maybe with a hint of fear, as some people start throwing beers at the car. Fortunately he manages to escape after driving very slowly through the crowd.

After some time the police come and I think they want to shut it down. At the same time we decide to leave and walk a bit more. The sun has already set by this point. I notice that the city looks really dirty: garbage everywhere, broken glass, thrown bikes, vomit and this almost permanent smell of urine all around. I don't think I have ever seen Amsterdam this dirty before. Between the mess I spot a sealed bottle of Aperol that I put in my backpack. At Spui there is a passed-out girl lying on the sidewalk, with her friends trying to figure out what to do. We ask them if they need help, to which they say no, so we keep walking. Everyone on the street looks intoxicated.

Since we can't really figure out what to do next we decide to go to a bar to have one more beer. At this point some of my friends are discussing going to a club. I already feel exhausted and I can't imagine staying out longer, especially since the next day I have to go to work. After I finish my beer I leave and start walking towards my bike. At a corner there is a stash of clothes and stuff that apparently wasn't sold during the day. After some digging I find a wool coat in good condition that I take with me.

I am stressed about whether my bike is still where I parked it, but it is. Cycling home is tricky as the streets are full of broken glass and the last thing I want is a flat tyre. I get home and sleep. I am very surprised the next day when I am biking to work that the city is mostly clean, like King's Day didn't leave any trace.

### **Clubs, Raves, and the Architecture of Suspended Guilt**

Unlike churches, prisons, or monuments—spaces explicitly designed to institutionalize guilt—clubs and venues hosting raves can be understood as architectures that manage guilt by suspending or displacing it. The transgressions

at stake are not against divine law, state authority, or historical memory, but against social norms surrounding sexuality, intoxication, and bodily excess. Often located in peripheral industrial sites or behind unmarked doors, these spaces provide both the material infrastructure and symbolic atmosphere that allow participants to indulge in practices—drug use, alcohol consumption, promiscuity—that might otherwise carry guilt in everyday contexts.

McKenzie Wark (2023), in *Raving*, describes the rave as an experience of “dissolution,” where the self is absorbed into sound, rhythm, and collective movement. This dissolution is not only aesthetic but ethical: the norms and prohibitions that generate guilt in everyday life are suspended in favour of a temporary autonomous zone (Bey, 1991), where alternative forms of relationality are practiced. Architecture is crucial: darkness, strobe lights, smoke, and immersive soundscapes dissolve boundaries and disorient normative control. By displacing the subject from visibility and exposure, clubs provide a reprieve from the surveillant gaze that, as Freud (2010) suggests, is central to the production of guilt.

Screening practices—door policies, guest lists, queues, ID checks, and selective admission—function as ritualized filters that externalize guilt and concentrate it at the edge of the venue. The queue is a liminal device in which normative scrutiny is performed and contained: moral judgment and social sorting are enacted before entry, allowing the interior to operate under a different ethical regime. Architecturally, layered thresholds (street → vestibule → dancefloor) stage a progressive de-inhibition, moving participants from public surveillance to controlled anonymity. This boundary pedagogy not only manages risk and reputation but also converts potential guilt into a pre-entry ordeal, thereby protecting the interior from continuous moral intrusion..

Spatial design and construction details reinforce this logic of suspension. Inside, architecture produces anonymity: dim lighting and dense crowds obscure individual identity, while immersive sound overwhelms the rational, self-reflective faculties that typically sustain guilt. In this sense, the rave can function as a ritualized exorcism of guilt, channelling transgression into a collective and aestheticized experience rather than an individual burden. Sound insulation is also critical: by containing noise within the club, it both prevents conflict with neighbours and creates a self-contained world where participants can lose track of time. Advanced sound systems, with sub-bass frequencies that resonate through the body, enhance the sense of dissolution by shifting perception from rational listening to corporeal vibration. Lighting systems, from strobes to LEDs, destabilize the sense of temporality, producing fragmented rhythms that align with the disorientation of intoxication. These material choices are not neutral—they construct environments where guilt is not erased but temporarily suspended through sensory saturation.

Usually these venues also offer some kind of harm-reduction infrastructures. the presence of dedicated chill-out rooms, potable water stations, quiet refuges, first-

aid points, and drug-checking services reframes the interior as a *managed-risk* environment. These infrastructures signal institutional acknowledgement of transgression while prioritizing care, thereby translating moral issues into pragmatic support. Such provisions convert the suspension of guilt from a purely atmospheric effect into an ethical protocol embedded in spatial organization and operations.

Clubs and raves do not eliminate guilt entirely but they regulate it through displacement. The temporary suspension of norms often entails a return of guilt after the event in the form of hangovers, regrets, social stigmatization. This ambivalence reveals the double function of rave spaces: they are not guilt-free zones but guilt-management devices that allow transgression within bounded spatial and temporal frames. This echoes what Wark (2023) calls the “afterlife” of raving: the experience may be ecstatic and liberating in the moment, yet it produces lasting questions about one’s relation to self, society, and the law.

Clubs also maintain a specific relation to the urban fabric. Many occupy marginal spaces: abandoned warehouses, industrial peripheries, or underground basements. Their marginality reflects society’s ambivalence: clubs are tolerated as outlets for excess but often excluded from the legitimate spaces of the city. This marginal positioning also intensifies their character as spaces of transgression, set apart from the everyday life of work, commerce, and family. Yet urban policies vary widely. Berlin, for example, has embraced clubs as part of its cultural economy, granting them recognition and protection as legitimate cultural venues (Rapp, 2019). In contrast, other cities such as London or New York often regulate, restrict, or displace clubs through zoning laws, licensing restrictions, and police crackdowns, pushing them into precarious or temporary existence. In some contexts, rave culture has been pushed to rural or peripheral zones, reinforcing the sense that it must remain outside the moralized order of the urban centre.

This spatial differentiation highlights how guilt is unevenly managed at the urban scale. Cities like Berlin incorporate raving into their cultural infrastructure, displacing guilt by legitimizing it as “art” or “heritage.” Others push clubs to the margins, stigmatizing them as guilty spaces that threaten order, thereby displacing societal anxieties about pleasure, drugs, and excess onto these marginalized geographies. In both cases, the urban fabric itself becomes a mechanism of guilt regulation: by either embracing or excluding raves, cities decide how collective transgression is spatially contained.

It is also noteworthy that clubs and rave venues are rarely acknowledged within architectural literature. They often emerge not through formal commissions but through ad-hoc conversions. This absence may be interpreted as disciplinary blind spot: architecture tends to valorize spaces of order, permanence, and civic representation while avoiding spaces associated with intoxication, illegality, or transgression. The lack of theorization can itself be read as disciplinary guilt displacement: architects externalize “guilty” aspects of urban life to informal or

unregulated practices. The invisibility of these spaces in architectural discourse reflects not only social stigma but also the discipline's anxieties about complicity in pleasure, excess, and transgression.

### **Architecture for sex**

Architecture related to sex and sex work is a morally charged field in which design and planning regulate guilt. Sexuality, morality, and economy converge to make the spatialization of guilt both visible and contested. At the core lies the tension between guilt associated with sexual desire, the moralization of sex work, and broader anxieties about exploitation and trafficking. These tensions are rarely confined to individuals but they are also managed through spatial practices of zoning, concealment, and visibility that both reflect and reproduce social norms.

Urban zoning is central. Concentrating sex work in particular districts produces a geography of guilt in which stigma is both contained and displaced. Zoning limits the confrontation of “respectable” publics with activities coded as immoral while creating bounded spaces where guilt can be enacted, suspended, or redistributed (Hubbard, 1999, 2011; Hubbard & Whowell, 2008; Weitzer, 2012). Licensing regimes, buffer zones around schools or religious buildings, and nuisance ordinances add further layers of spatial control, translating moral hierarchies into legal topographies (Hubbard & Whowell, 2008). This separation sustains a double stance: sex work is condemned discursively yet permitted in controlled zones, offloading guilt from the normative city to regulated enclaves.

Internal spatial qualities of sex-work venues also regulate guilt. Transparency and opacity are key. Highly visible street- or window-front formats normalize sex by making it public but also amplify moral judgment by exposing bodies to the civic gaze. Conversely, clandestine formats hidden in apartments, basements, or peripheral warehouses mobilize concealment to minimize guilt through secrecy, at the cost of intensifying stigma and risk when uncovered (Hubbard, 1999; Sanders, 2004). Architectural decisions about thresholds, circulation, and surveillance—controlled entries, CCTV, viewing corridors, compartmentalized rooms—calibrate exposure, discretion, and safety, thereby anticipating, displacing, or enforcing guilt and shame.

At the elite end, sex work is spatially absorbed into infrastructures of hospitality and domesticity. Concierge systems, key-card elevators, private entries, and room service logistics provide discretion that reclassifies the same exchange as luxury service. Architecture here displaces guilt through anonymity and status, moving it from public stigma to private secrecy (Bernstein, 2007; Weitzer, 2012).

The phenomenon of sex tourism further illustrates this dynamic. For many clients, engaging in sex work abroad reduces the psychic weight of guilt by displacing

transgression into a foreign space. Away from familiar moral frameworks and social surveillance, guilt can be temporarily suspended. This echoes Freud's (1930/2010) insight that guilt is bound to the internalization of social prohibitions and the gaze of others. By situating sexual encounters in unfamiliar or exoticized spaces, individuals can act "outside" their usual moral universe, experiencing desire with diminished guilt.

Aesthetic regimes within sex-themed venues also act on guilt. Kitsch, parody, and exaggerated erotic imagery frequently operate as affective technologies that turn sexuality into spectacle. By amplifying signs of desire through neon, mirrors, soft furnishings, and themed décor, venues transform morally fraught encounters into playful performance. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this can be read as disavowal: the subject acknowledges desire while refusing its full ethical weight, "I know very well, but nevertheless..." (Žižek, 1989). In this frame, kitsch reframes sexual acts as stylized hyperreality rather than morally serious engagements, which helps to reduce guilt. Freud's theory of jokes and humour as releasing tension around taboo themes supports this reading: laughter and parody diffuse shame and allow participation without full identificatory commitment (Freud, 2000). These aesthetic choices are not neutral decoration; they are spatial devices that mediate how guilt is anticipated and processed.

These mechanisms of course do not resolve the ethics of sex work. They specify where guilt resides, how intensely it is felt, and by whom it is borne. At the urban scale, zoning and licensing concentrate or disperse guilt and determine who must encounter it. At the building scale, thresholds, surveillance, circulation, and degrees of transparency calibrate exposure and discretion. At the atmospheric scale, décor and soundscapes enable disavowal and humour to reduce the subjective burden of guilt.

### **A walk in the Red Light District**

I rarely walk in De Wallen. I find the amount of people overwhelming. But tonight my plan is to take a slow walk to try to understand aspects of the urban life there. I parked my bike in the underground parking at Beursplein and started walking on Warmoesstraat, just behind De Bijenkorf. The first thing I saw was a store selling condoms of all kinds. It looked busy, and the windows displayed condoms in different sizes and colours. Tacky but cute, I thought, while I kept walking.

It was Saturday evening and the street was really crowded. Most of the people seemed to be tourists. The street had pubs, fast food places, souvenir shops that seemed to sell a bit of everything—from tulips and Van Gogh magnets to tobacco and bongos—tattoo workshops, hostels, and more. A true tourist street.

Nearing Oude Kerk, I saw two gay cruising bars next to each other: Eagle and Dirty Dicks. Neither offered a glimpse inside. Each had a door with a bell you needed to ring to enter. I remembered a friend telling me that both were more or less the same and not worth visiting, as they were very sex-oriented and mostly older men went there. As I looked from a distance, I saw an older man enter.

After passing them, I turned towards Oude Kerk and approached it from the north. I found this part very interesting. There was a prostitution information center, a porn cinema, a kindergarten, a bar, and sex work windows, all next to each other. Out of all the windows there, only one had a sex worker sitting inside, checking her phone.

And then came the part I wasn't enthusiastic about: entering the dense and crowded section of the area where most of the red lights are. On the bridge I saw two Amsterdam hosts in red jackets talking to each other. Suddenly, one of them approached someone who looked like he was taking a picture of the canal to tell him something. I guessed it was about the prohibition of taking photos of the sex workers. I started having this feeling that if I stayed still for too long, or walked too slowly I would look suspicious. I tried to get over that by thinking that in the dense crowd I was most probably not at anyone's attention and kept walking through the narrow streets filled with all kinds of people.

I tried to guess people's intentions, but how could I know? Some looked annoyed that they couldn't walk quickly enough, blocked by the crowds (that's usually me, too). One even carried his bike while ringing the bell so people would move aside. Others looked sketchy, dressed in sweatpants and just standing around. Many were clearly tourists who, from their attitude, seemed uninterested to have sex or engage in any way with the sex workers but are there to witness what to them seemed totally strange.

That brought me back to my usual feeling when I'm there: it feels like being at the zoo, where most people act as if they are curiously watching another species behind the safety of the glass. Some didn't hesitate to point, stare, or laugh at the sex workers, who seemed accustomed to this seemingly degrading attitude.

I started to realize that with all my assumptions, I might also be acting in the same way, only on another layer, observing the people in the street rather than the sex workers themselves. Suddenly, a group of four young men grabbed my attention. They seemed to be trying to get sex workers to open their windows. They failed at several, until one finally opened. They pointed at one of their group—the least conventionally attractive, according to current beauty standards—as the potential customer. The sex worker rejected him and shut the window. Disappointed, they kept trying, and one or two windows later, they succeeded.

As the client entered, the others looked satisfied and moved to a corner of the street to wait. Feeling invested, I decided to keep an eye on them, pretending to read something on my phone while staying far enough away so they wouldn't notice me.

I felt kind of guilty for spying on them and started questioning my choice. About ten minutes later, I saw them moving again. I hurried closer and saw their friend leaving.

They shouted and cheered for him. He looked embarrassed. Being right next to them, I overheard them asking in thick British accents whether he was “not a virgin anymore.”

Feeling a strange satisfaction from what I had witnessed, I walked towards Nieuwmarkt, wondering if my favourite Italian restaurant in the area was still open so I could get a pizza. Unfortunately, it was too late. On the way, a dodgy-looking man approached me aggressively: “Cocaine? Cocaine?” It took me a moment to understand him, but I quickly replied, “No, thank you,” thinking it was not a great way to approach potential customers.

Still in my investigative mode, I decided to follow him at a distance to see if he did the same with others. After two failed attempts, he met a group on Geldersekade by the canal. They all looked suspicious. After a few seconds, they split up, but a homeless-looking man approached them. They seemed to know him, and one told him in English that they had to leave, as they couldn't stay in the same place for long. At that point, I decided it wasn't safe to keep following them and turned into Zeedijk instead.

Zeedijk is such a strange and diverse street: a Chinatown, restaurants and bars ranging from very touristy to more local-looking, the usual souvenir shops, electronics stores, and clothing shops that made no sense together. There was a Comme des Garçons boutique, a handmade upcycled clothes shop, fetish wear stores, streetwear shops where people queued to get in, and small local boutiques. Almost everything. But it wasn't very busy, probably too late.

I kept wandering the narrow streets and canals. I saw a few more people entering or leaving windows, most of them tourists. Many seemed Middle Eastern, which surprised me. The crowd was diverse: younger and older, different ethnicities, different styles. Some looked confident, others shy, some with friends, others alone. Quite a few were stoned and disoriented. But my initial impression remained: most people weren't there to buy sex, only to look. Passing the very postmodern and kitsch sex theatre Casa Rosso, which seemed busy, I wondered how many would go there if it wasn't in Amsterdam. I doubted commodified sex could appear less sinful anywhere else.

While I still found these kinds of crowds very tiring and overwhelming, I kept thinking that it's very interesting how this very particular and contradictory urban arrangement works successfully for so long despite the fact that nobody is seemingly overly happy with it. The omnipresent ‘how to Amsterdam’ signs, the many Amsterdam hosts (who they appear less threatening than the police or the municipal police) patrolling the streets, as well as the many signs put by residents asking people not to pee or shout outside their houses showed that locals aren't

really happy for sure. And I couldn't imagine the sex workers enjoying the endless stares from people who weren't potential clients.

By then I felt done for the night. I went to a nice bar I had discovered a few weeks earlier, De Buurvrouw, also in the area. It was also kind of kitsch but fun in a non-pretentious way and seemed to attract a nice crowd. As I was finishing my beer a large group of loud tourists entered. I decided that it was time to leave. On my way back to my bike, I thought that while I find the concept of De Wallen exciting, I wouldn't choose to live there.

### **The very "Green architecture"**

Environmental guilt is a kind of newer collective guilt is increasingly tied to the ecological crisis, where individuals and collectives confront their complicity in environmental degradation and climate change. Architecture and urban planning have become central arenas for negotiating this guilt, with the rise of "green" and "sustainable" design serving as both technical responses and symbolic gestures. Certified "eco-buildings," covered in solar panels, green walls, or wind turbines, function not only as environmental infrastructures but also as cultural artifacts that relieve guilt by signaling responsibility and virtue.

The regulation of guilt in sustainable architecture operates on two levels. First, it functions symbolically: recycled materials, green roofs, and vertical gardens make ecological responsibility visible in the urban landscape, transforming sustainability into an aesthetic and moral spectacle. This allows corporations, governments, or individuals to visibly "perform" their concern for the planet, thereby minimizing the burden of ecological guilt. Second, it operates disciplinarily: new buildings often include smart technologies that monitor energy use, water consumption, and waste, subtly enforcing behavioural regulation in line with environmental goals. Architecture thus transforms guilt into a structure of both representation and control.

The pursuit of sustainability in architecture is ambivalent. Many sustainable buildings achieve only marginal performance improvements, raising concerns about "greenwashing," where the symbolic function of guilt minimization and aestheticization outweighs ecological benefits (Checker, 2011). In this sense, sustainable architecture often functions as a guilt minimizer rather than a resolver. It allows subjects to feel absolved by inhabiting or displaying eco-friendly spaces, without necessarily altering the larger structures of consumption and growth that drive environmental harm.

Returning to Bruckner's critique of Western guilt, ecological discourses increasingly mobilize guilt to impose moral burdens on individuals and societies (recall the letter to the dean). Environmentalism risks becoming a "tyranny of guilt," inviting endless

atonement for planetary damage. Green architecture, in this frame, becomes a ritualized penance: a materialized confession that simultaneously absolves and perpetuates guilt, offering symbolic purification while leaving systemic issues intact.

At the same time, climate change has become a politicized and moralized field, where scientific discourse is often subordinated to ideological battles and moral narratives. Rather than being treated primarily as a scientific problem of carbon emissions and ecological systems, climate change is framed as a moral drama of sin and atonement, responsibility and denial. In this context, sustainable architecture becomes part of a symbolic economy of virtue, where buildings act not only as technical solutions but as public declarations of moral standing.

This produces an elitist approach to sustainable architecture. High-tech ecological buildings, with specialized materials and advanced technologies, tend to be expensive, accessible mainly to wealthy institutions, corporations, or elites. This creates an uneven geography of environmental guilt regulation: affluent groups can minimize their guilt through green buildings, while marginalized populations remain with older, less sustainable stock. Here, guilt is not only managed but stratified, reinforcing socio-economic divisions under the guise of ecological responsibility (Swyngedouw, 2010).

It is crucial to underline, however, that this critique does not reject sustainability itself. Sustainability should remain a central architectural and societal goal, but one pursued through structural changes. Without this structural dimension, green architecture becomes another apparatus for displacing guilt rather than transforming the conditions that generate it. In other words it risks aestheticizing and commodifying guilt, turning environmental responsibility into a luxury good and a status symbol.

Unlike the previous examples with relatively fixed and singular uses, sustainable architecture transcends programme. It can be applied to all kinds of building programmes, or even entire neighbourhoods, embedding ecological virtue across diverse contexts of everyday life. This adaptability means that the regulation of guilt through green architecture is potentially more diffuse and pervasive than in the previous cases, shaping not only specialized sites of morality, discipline, or remembrance but the full spectrum of urban and domestic environments.

### **Austere architecture – the ascetic priestly remedy**

Mies van der Rohe's dictum "*less is more*" has long haunted architectural culture and has become the mantra of modern architecture. While this phrase has usually been interpreted as a stylistic credo, it also resonates with an ascetic ethos, where restraint and renunciation become virtues in themselves. Pier Vittorio Aureli (2013), in *Less is Enough*, reformulates this logic: the question is not whether "less"

produces aesthetic beauty, but whether “less” can become the measure of an ethical and political life. For Aureli, less is not more but enough—a condition of sufficiency where restraint becomes a way of resisting accumulation and reclaiming autonomy from the pressures of capital. This reframing situates architecture within a broader moral economy. Living with “less” becomes a secularized form of asceticism, echoing Nietzsche’s description of the priestly remedy for guilt: a strategy of renunciation that converts suffering into meaning.

Yet Nietzsche ultimately rejects asceticism as a true solution. Ascetic practices do not heal guilt; they perpetuate and intensify it. Asceticism may promise redemption, but it does so by continually reminding the subject of their weakness and debt—whether to God, morality, or themselves. In the long run, Nietzsche argues, asceticism deepens *ressentiment*: it channels guilt inward, turning it into self-punishment rather than liberation. This ambivalence remains crucial for understanding the persistence of ascetic logics in contemporary architecture.

Maurizio Lazzarato (2012) in *The Making of the Indebted Man* argues that neoliberal societies produce subjects primarily as debtors: individuals bound by promises, obligations, and a perpetual sense of owing. Debt here is not only financial but moral—an existential condition of guilt for existing within systems of credit, consumption, and ecological crisis. Architecture that embraces the principle of “less” can be seen as a spatial response to this indebted condition. By stripping away excess, privileging sufficiency, and valorising austerity, such architecture embodies the moral economy of debt: it gives form to the subject’s attempt to atone, to live responsibly, and to convert guilt into virtue.

Historically, this architecture of less is exemplified in the monk’s cell, a deliberately constraining but voluntary space. With its narrow dimensions, bare furnishings, and repetitive routines, the cell becomes a moral technology: it disciplines the body while framing deprivation as virtue. To inhabit the cell is to spatialize guilt and to convert limitation into ethical meaning. The monk accepts confinement as the visible proof of spiritual struggle, an architectural translation of guilt into redemptive practice.

In contemporary architecture, the logic of the cell reappears most clearly in housing, where the discourse of “less” takes two distinct forms. On one side, there is the academic, theoretical, and experimental tradition represented by Aureli and other architects such as Aristeides Antonas, who propose ascetic models of inhabitation—cells, shared infrastructures, protocols—that intentionally embrace limitation as a critique of capitalist excess. Their projects can be read as intellectual exercises in architectural asceticism, where austerity functions as an ethical and political proposition. On the other side, however, the reality of housing under neoliberal capitalism often translates “less” into cheapness rather than sufficiency. Here, austerity is not a critical stance but a market imposition: shrinking apartments,

micro-units, subdivided dwellings and bad quality materials that reflect the extraction of profit from scarcity.

Housing is increasingly less an object of personal ownership and more an instrument of financial speculation, with real estate concentrated in the hands of corporate landlords, private equity firms, and elites. For individuals, the guilt of homeownership takes two forms: those who cannot afford property internalize a sense of failure, while those who can afford it often feel complicit in processes of inequality and speculation. In both cases, guilt becomes a disciplinary mechanism that sustains capitalist structures, channelling frustration and responsibility onto individuals while legitimizing systemic dispossession.

Minimalism complicates this picture further. As a purely aestheticized form of asceticism, minimalism offers the subject the image of virtue without its ethical substance. White walls and carefully curated emptiness become a lifestyle marker that displaces guilt rather than transforms it. The inhabitant of such a space can imagine themselves as living with less, when in reality minimalism often requires significant financial investment and the luxury of choice. This aesthetic of austerity masks consumption under the guise of restraint, offering a symbolic absolution of guilt.

The distinction between austerity as ethical project and cheapness as imposed scarcity is crucial. Ascetic housing in Aureli's or Antonas's sense seeks to cultivate a different relation to space, property, and sufficiency, turning *less* into a practice of autonomy. By contrast, capitalist housing markets turn *less* into deprivation: smaller and smaller units rented at higher costs, framed not as sufficiency but as necessity. In the former, austerity regulates guilt by transforming it into virtue, reframing the subject as someone who chooses to live with less. In the latter, austerity intensifies guilt by marking individuals as failures in the market, compelled to internalize scarcity as their personal burden. Both regulate guilt, but in different registers: one as a voluntary ethical choice, the other as an imposed economic condition.

#### **4. ~~AND NOW WHAT~~**

- ~~Visibility/Exposure (surveillance, gaze, lighting, thresholds)~~
- ~~Access/Boundary (zoning, thresholds, restricted areas)~~
- ~~Temporality/Ritual (repetition, cycles, queues,)~~
- ~~Material Atmosphere (scale, light, acoustics, haptics)~~
- ~~Symbolic Programme (didactic imagery, signage, codes)~~
- ~~Behavioural Telemetry (sensors, metering, dashboards)~~

### **EVERYTHING IS A PRISON OF SOME SORT**

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