

The masculine and the masculinity in architecture

O masculino e a masculinidade na arquitetura

Lo masculino y la masculinidad en la arquitectura

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Abstract

From the Antiquity to Modernity, the discipline's treatises that discuss the precepts of good Western architecture have chosen the male body as the appropriate proportionality parameter for the building conception. These writings also often associates the male body as a reference of austerity, rigor, rationality and objectivity. However, the body and the male considered as canonical by the discipline refers only to certain structures, measurements, proportions and attributes. However, the body and the masculinity considered as canonical by the discipline refers only to certain structures, measurements, proportions and attributes. Therefore, it leaves out other expressions of corporeality and masculinity. In this sense, the article examines the architectural role in both cultural and social construction of the ideal male body and masculinity by revisiting the main architectural manuals. Without aiming to propose a new paradigm of the body, this essay explores how some experiences in contemporary art highlight the repetition of virility symbols and expose the canonical structures of masculinity reinforced by the history of architecture.

Keywords: Architecture; Body (art); Historiography; Masculinity; Contemporary art.

Resumo

Da Antigüidade à Modernidade, os tratados da disciplina que versam sobre os preceitos da boa arquitetura ocidental, elegeram o corpo do homem como o parâmetro de proporcionalidade adequada para a ideação dos edifícios. Estes escritos também comumente associam o masculino como referência de austeridade, rigor, racionalidade e objetividade. Todavia, o corpo e o masculino tomados como canônico pela disciplina se referem apenas à determinadas estruturas, medidas, proporções e atributos. Excluem, portanto, as demais expressões de corporeidade e de masculinidade. Neste sentido, o artigo discute o papel da arquitetura na construção cultural e social do ideal de corpo masculino e de masculinidade por meio da retomada dos principais manuais da arquitetura que estabelecem relações construtivas e simbólicas entre corpo e arquitetura. Sem almejar propor um novo paradigma de corpo, observa-se como algumas experiências na arte contemporânea denunciam a repetição dos símbolos de virilidade e tensionam as estruturas canônicas das masculinidades reforçadas pela história da arquitetura.

Palavras-Chave: Arquitetura; Corpo (artes); Historiografia; Masculinidade; Arte contemporânea.

Resumen

Desde la Antigüedad hasta la Modernidad, los tratados de la disciplina que tratan sobre los preceptos de la buena arquitectura occidental eligieron el cuerpo del hombre como parámetro de proporcionalidad adecuada para la concepción de los edificios. Estos escritos también suelen asociar lo masculino como referencia de austeridad, rigor, racionalidad y objetividad. Sin embargo, el cuerpo y lo masculino tomados como canónicos por la disciplina se refieren únicamente a determinadas estructuras, medidas, proporciones y atributos. Excluyen, por lo tanto, las demás expresiones de corporeidad y de masculinidad. En este sentido, el artículo discute el papel de la arquitectura en la construcción cultural y social del ideal de cuerpo masculino y de masculinidad mediante la revisión de los principales manuales de arquitectura que establecen relaciones constructivas y simbólicas entre cuerpo y arquitectura. Sin aspirar a proponer un nuevo paradigma de cuerpo, se observa cómo algunas experiencias en el arte contemporáneo denuncian la repetición de los símbolos de virilidad y tensionan las estructuras canónicas de las masculinidades reforzadas por la historia de la arquitectura.

Palabras clave: Arquitectura; Cuerpo (artes); Historiografía; Masculinidad; Arte contemporáneo.

1 Introduction

Internal and external. This is the dualism that, according to Diana Agrest (1988), shapes the norms of Western architectural tradition and thought that have determined the relationship between the body and architecture. These foundations, named by the theorist as an “architectural system” (Agrest, 1988), can be traced from the Renaissance treatises, based on Vitruvian lessons, to modern precepts. Despite the different aesthetic sensibilities and ethical intentions that drove theoretical production in each period, for the author, this dual relationship has remained unchanged throughout the history of the discipline.

Based on logocentric and anthropomorphic discourses, this system, on the one hand, places the male body as the protagonist, establishing it as the central element in the development of architectural and urban rules and configurations¹. On the other hand, it attributes women and their bodies as external entities to the system. However, as Agrest points out, in architecture what is external is not necessarily excluded or erased, but symbolically repressed. In Agrest’s words:

Society establishes a certain kind of symbolic order where not everyone has an equal chance of fitting. Those who do not fit have to find their place between symbolic orders, in the interstices; they represent a certain symbolic instability. These are the people often called odd, abnormal, perverse [...]. (Agrest, 1988, p. 30).

Although Agrest’s argument focuses on the marginal place of women’s bodies in the precepts of architecture, a careful reading of some of the founding texts of this tradition² shows that not all male bodies are framed as the normative basis for the discipline. There is therefore a question here. Which male body and which masculinity were taken as suitable to serve this system?

There are formal requirements: a body circumscribed by a square and a circumference, with a certain structure, proportion and mass. However, as well as complying with geometric rules, the canonical male body must be firm, straight, youthful, vigorous and virile. In addition, behavior should also meet certain demands. Reason, austerity, haughtiness, functionality and objectivity should also belong to the proper masculine

¹ In her text, Diana Agrest (1988) presents two architectural “scenes” that demonstrate the suppression of women’s bodies in the metaphors and analogies that construct the ideology of the “architectural system.” In the first, the author revisits the texts of the main Renaissance treatises: Leon Battista Alberti’s *De Re Aedificatoria*; Antonio Alverlino Filarete’s *Trattato di Architettura*; and Francesco di Giorgio’s *Trattato di Architettura Civile e Militare* and *Trattato di Architettura, Ingegneria e Arte Militare*. According to her, these writings, based on Vitruvius’ *Books*, specified architectural rules and regulations. Firstly, the male body was established as a formal and proportional parameter to be replicated in architecture and urban design. Then, the writings of Filarete and Di Giorgio suppressed gender distinctions by establishing the male body as synonymous with the human figure and metaphorically associating the function of reproduction and nutrition with man. In the second scene, Agrest recovers the concepts present in the social unconscious that relate the female body to the spaces of the city and buildings. These delimit the wife to the kitchen and the harlot to the street.

² The figure of the male body inscribed in the square and the circumference, narrated in Vitruvius’ *De Architectura Libri Decem*, was widely the subject of representations and studies of proportions during the Renaissance. Of particular note are the figurations drawn up by Cesare Cesariano, Francesco di Giorgio and Leonardo. However, the relationship between the body and architecture was not always maintained as an imperative in architectural treatises and manuals. In the 1700s, as Mario D’Agostino (2006) reminds us, a new artistic disposition emerged, no longer based on mimetic studies, but on the defense of autonomous architecture and neutral, pure forms. It was the architect Le Corbusier, in his research into classical Greek architecture, who re-proposed the proportionality of the body as the basis for architectural design and construction.

nature. It is not inaccurate to say, therefore, that in the norms of the architectural system not only the female body was repressed, but also expressions of masculinity and corporeality that escaped the geometric and moral determinations established as adequate.

In light of this conjecture, this article seeks to demonstrate how architecture manuals and treatises have designated a certain expression of male corporeality as a parameter capable of regulating proportions, metaphors, signs and ornaments in architecture and urbanism. It also shows how this discourse contributes to outlining social norms about the beauty of the male body and the moral and virtuous behavior of men, so that only certain figures and behaviors are privileged to the detriment of others.

To this end, it seems appropriate to examine the theoretical writings that establish the link between the body and architecture as a protagonist in their theories. In this sense, the treatises of the Renaissance, as Agrest points out, have great relevance, as they founded the “foundations for Western architecture” (Agrest, 1988, p. 29). But in order to understand the active cultural role of the system of architecture in the construction of the ideals of the male gender, it is also necessary to indicate both the origin of this thought and its subsequent developments, namely classical antiquity and modernism.

In order to highlight these three periods in the history of architecture, the writings of Vitruvius, Leon Battista Alberti and Le Corbusier were mobilized, as well as some of their contemporary interlocutors. However, by choosing this triad we do not intend to offer the reader a historiographical sweep. Nor do we want to judge and rank these different sensibilities and theories of art and architecture ethically and aesthetically. Our aim is to identify traces of repetition in these writings on the body and exemplary masculinity. In this way, we highlight the distinction between the models of beauty and morality that occupy the interior of the architectural system and those that are external to it.

Firstly, we briefly discuss the theoretical links that contributed to the construction of this “architectural system,” such as the choice of the male body as the link between architecture and nature; the establishment of a scheme of proportions that geometrizes and defines the perfect shapes of the body; the delimitation of posture and behavior considered masculine and, finally, the spaces and materials that symbolically reflect the masculine.

Without aiming to find solutions to the gender determinations given by architecture, the article aims to help broaden the dialog about the relationship between masculinity and architecture. To this end, we show some experiments in the field of art that propose other forms and expressions of the body that can serve as ways of escaping the architectural discourse that has constructed the hegemonic idea of the body and masculinity. On the international scene, Cindy Sherman’s self-portraits stand out. Regarding the Brazilian scene, we refer to the exhibition “Elástica Dimensão Viril” [Elastic Virile Dimension] by artist and architect Ronaldo Paixão and the experiments in engraving by Helder Amorim. Through different paths, these artists present other possible ways of being male and masculine, putting the elastic culture of the body to the test.

2 Norm and gender in architecture

The link between the body and architecture is present in the best-known Western writings that prescribe the architect’s craft and the parts of good architecture. In Vitruvius’ *De*

Architectura Libri Decem, the first treatise on architecture of which we are aware, this analogy is made clear in books III and IV, which are dedicated to religious buildings. By taking the lessons of Greek antiquity as the first foundation of his work, the Roman architect started from a premise: in order to achieve virtuosity, architecture should follow the guidelines of symmetry, a rule which determines that harmony lies in the correspondence and proportion of the parts in relation to the whole. A relationship found only in the mathematics given by natural manifestations. There is, then, a first requirement: architecture should reference and mimic nature in order to achieve excellence.

Man's body, in turn, was the possible link between architecture and nature. This statement does not seem to have been inaugurated by Vitruvius, but refers to the Pythagorean aphorism "[...] man is the measure of all things" and the human anatomy studies of the sculptor Polykleitos³. However, these prepositions do not refer to just any male body. Certain proportions had to be met in such a way that the body circumscribed the rectangle and the square, with the navel as the geometric center. As Vitruvius describes in the first pages of Book III:

In fact, nature has composed the human body in such a way that the face, from the chin to the top of the forehead and to the root of the hair, corresponds to its tenth part; the outstretched hand, from the wrist to the end of the middle finger, to its tenth part; the head, from the chin to the coccyx, to its eighth part; from the upper part of the chest, at the base of the neck, to the root of the hair, to its sixth part, and from the middle of the chest to the coccyx of the head, to its fourth part [...]. The navel is, of course, the center of the body and, in fact, if a man lies on his back with his hands and feet outstretched and we place a compass center on his navel, describing a circumference, the fingers of any of the hands or feet will be touched by the curved line. (Vitruvius, 2006, p. 109-110).⁴

In order to take the body as a representative of nature, Vitruvius converted it into a system of modulation in which the smaller parts of the body act as modules and are in proportion to the larger parts. This description gained great popularity among later treatise writers who dedicated themselves to representing the Vitruvian descriptive canon with illustrations and mathematical diagrams. Leonardo's was certainly the most widespread example. The humanist, advancing the scheme given by the author of *De Architectura*, built the representation of the body not only in a two-dimensional system, but sought ways to work it in a rationalized perspective.

For the purpose of getting closer to nature, the male body was inserted into modulation schemes that regulated what was a perfect and beautiful body. This body served as the methodological and metric foundation for the buildings that enjoyed the greatest prominence in the polis: the temples. These sacred buildings, therefore, had to be erected according to the same proportional schemes as the abstract body, because the mathematical relationship would guarantee the elegance of the enterprise. The column, the main building component, was what most clearly revealed the correlation with the

³ Joseph Rykwert (2015, p. 120) explains the relationship of the Vitruvian text to the lessons of Greek philosophers, artists and mathematicians: "[...] the organization of Vitruvius' text was clearly derived from some lost Pythagorean source; however, Vitruvius' relationship to the 'ancients' and the 'mathematicians' is obscure. His partially acknowledged debt to such a source suggests a connection between the forgotten Pythagorean and post-Polyklethian canons, although the affiliation must remain a presupposition."

⁴ The authors have translated this and all subsequent non-English citations.

body. Thus, in accordance with the measurements of the ideal man, the Doric column should have a starting diameter of six times its height, as explained by Vitruvius:

Wanting to place the columns in this temple, not having the respective dimensions and looking for a convenient methodology that would allow them to support the weight and configure a manifest elegance, they accurately measured the sole of the manly foot and reproduced it in height. Having discovered that the foot corresponded to a sixth of a man's height, they transferred this to the column and, whatever the diameter of the base of the shaft, they raised it six times in height, including the capital. In this way, the Doric column began to show in buildings the proportion, solidity and elegance of a manly body. (Vitrúvio, 2006, p. 143).

But it wasn't just a question of a geometric scheme; it was also important to transfer the appearance and expression of the masculine ideal to the building. According to the principle of decorum, the constructive elements and ornaments should be used according to the criteria of convenience, so that "Doric temples are erected to Minerva, Mars and Hercules; in fact, it is appropriate that these gods, due to their strength, should erect buildings devoid of ornaments" (Vitrúvio, 2006, p. 38). Manliness, elegance, strength, solidity and the absence of ornament are the constant vocabulary adopted to describe "masculine" architecture. For this reason, the Doric genre was used to pay homage to religious figures who expressed strength, power and rationality. On the other hand, endowed with "delicacy" and "subtlety," the Ionic genre was suitable for deities who expressed femininity in their essence, such as the goddess Diana.

These passages suggest a clear division and understanding of what determines masculinity and femininity. Constructive elements and architectural ornaments should therefore materialize these two poles. On the one hand, the Doric order: firm, straight, elegant, solid, and without ornaments, in other words, components that illustrate and determine the masculine ideal of corporeality and virility. On the other, the Ionic column: delicate, subtle, endowed with ornament and arabesques. In this way, the first architectural treatises not only inform us about the character of good architecture and the virtuous work of the architect, but also operate with restricted ideals of gender and beauty that have been reaffirmed throughout the history and theory of architecture.

Similar relationships and analogies between the body and architecture are also found, centuries later, in Leon Battista Alberti's *De Re Aedificatoria*. Mindful of Vitruvius' lessons, the Renaissance author discusses genres in architecture and their ornaments in his Sixth book. For him, these are elements drawn from the observation of nature and constitute the "universal principle of beauty" (Alberti, 2011, p. 591). It is, therefore, beauty whose judgment is common to all men and not just that which refers to taste or private opinion. In other words, it is an "innate principle in the spirit" (Alberti, 2011, p. 592) that also awakens reason. Beauty in bodies, and consequently in the art of building, was found in the perfect alliance and agreement between the parts of a given whole, so that no element could be extracted or added without loss:

Each body is made up of specific and proper parts, from which, if you really take one away, or reduce it to a larger or smaller one, or transfer it to inappropriate garters, what was in this body in accordance with decorum will deteriorate. (Alberti, 2011, p. 592).

Still in the Sixth book, Alberti maintains the polarity between feminine and masculine given by Vitruvius, using correlated terms:

[...] taught by nature, they discovered three ways of decorating the house [...]. One of them was more compact and better suited to hard work and durability: this they called Doric; the other was fine, very elegant; they called it Corinthian; the middle one, however, was a kind of combination of both, they called Ionic. (Alberti, 2011, p. 594).

Although the modular formulas of the temples described by Vitruvius are not the same as those indicated by Alberti or other treatise writers, both mention balance, harmony and agreement between the parts to define the beauty of human bodies and architecture. It should be noted, however, that the bodies that are taken as paradigmatic, on the one hand, are not taken directly from the imitation of nature, but are idealized figurations regulated by the accuracy of a geometric structure. On the other hand, behavioral and social characteristics that delimit the male universe also run through these writings. Attributes such as virility, seriousness, rationality and power are commonly mentioned.

The concept of *kanōn*, a term that originally meant “standard or criterion of excellence” (Rykwert, 2015, p. 121), was transformed into a guideline for proportion and beauty in the hands of the artists of antiquity. The famous bronze statue of Polykleitos, the Doryphoros (Figure 1), embodied this notion of the canon of the male body. The piece was considered a standard to be pursued because it contained the exact proportions that represented perfection, with the head as the reference module for the other parts. As well as containing the ideal geometry, the figure also represents the posture that reflects balance, harmony, weight compensation and masculine haughtiness, conferred above all by the calm and centered countenance and the arrangement of the legs: one extended and fixed to the ground and the other at rest.

Figure 1: Doryphoros.



Source: Rykwert (2015, p. 124).

Andrew Stewart (1997) notes that these requirements transcended the world of art and architecture. They also reflect the Greek understanding of the excellence of masculinity to be achieved by a citizen: one who manages to balance physical and intellectual development. Any trace of deviation from these delimitations of perfection was condemned. Approaching gestures considered feminine, for example, jeopardized the status of a citizen, as Stewart points out

The goal was *arete* or personal excellence, and in classical Athens the *sophron* and the *kinaidos* represent the limiting cases. The first is the upright man of proven *arete* who has achieved self-regulation through self-knowledge – the perfect citizen – whereas the second is the opposite: a male prostitute or catamite. A man who likes being penetrated and is passive like a woman, he risks losing his citizen rights, the rights of the free, sovereign, active male. He has also failed to develop the latter's proper bodily *hexis*. His unsteady eye, bent neck, knock-knees, effeminate gesture, and mincing gait give him away at once. (Stewart, 1997, p. 11).

In the field of architecture, the Doric column was perhaps the most celebrated and used element because of its symbolic power. Not only was it a solution that articulated beauty and appropriateness, but the order elucidated civility, rationality, essentialism and vigor. Joseph Rykwert (2015, p. 354) shows that the Doric order was often considered superior to the others because “it was idealized as quintessential, the concentration of all that was best in Greek architecture.” Marc-Antoine Laugier's doctrine of the primitive hut, promoted in the mid-18th century, certainly also contributed to the imagery that associated the Doric column as the foundation of architecture. In his *Essai*, Laugier takes up the legend told by Vitruvius about the wooden hut from which Greek temples made of stone derive. He argues that the scheme of the pediment supported by the four pillars was present at the origin of architecture and that the Doric column effectively imitated this primitive construction. Although Laugier's theory is not based on archaeological evidence, as Rykwert (2015) points out, the Doric order metaphors of civility and essentiality have carried over into modern architectural projects.

Adolf Loos' proposal for the *Chicago Tribune Building* competition (Figure 2) in 1922 is an example of maintaining the Doric symbolism. The architect's design was in the form of an enormous Doric column whose black polished granite shaft would house 21 floors of office space. This building-column would be supported by an eleven-storey-high base made of terracotta brick. The main entrance would be located there, marked by a system of columns and entablature also made of black granite and arranged according to the temple of the *in antis* genre and supported by the cornice appropriate to the genre. For Loos, the brick base would show the continuity of Chicago, a close relationship with its surroundings. The column, meanwhile, would serve as a landmark in the city's landscape. And even in the face of the jury's rejection and harsh criticism from architectural theorists, Loos justified his project by the Doric order's ability to express historical tradition and civility without resorting to ornamentation and excess. In this sense, Rykwert clarifies the belief in the Doric order as a canon of integrity in architecture:

The Doric order seemed to have been the fundamental historical form, the great achievement of human construction, freed from structural contingency or the basic need for shelter [...]. [It] offered this particularly refined response: a civic response, which he saw as ennobling a particular setting [...]. [It] provided the only figure that could ennoble the basic need for shelter. (Rykwert, 2015, p. 44-45).

Figure 2: Adolf Loos' proposal for the *Chicago Tribune Building* competition, 1922.



Source: Rykwert (2015, p. 43).

On the other hand, the male body and the understanding of masculinity constituted in Antiquity operated as a foundation for other expressions of 20th century architecture. The geometric proportional scheme, beauty and universality were central to the research of Charles-Édouard Jeanneret, commonly known as Le Corbusier. In 1948, the architect released one of his most famous publications, *Le Modulor*. In 1953, he published the continuation of the same research, *Modulor 2*. In this context, the discipline of architecture focused its efforts on thinking about man, architecture and the city from the perspective of modernity, which celebrated the triumph of truth and reason, based on technique, industry and the machine.

Despite the distance in time between the treatises and this writing, the architect was attentive to the lessons of the masters of antiquity. His appreciation of the *Parthenon*, declared in his *Vers une Architecture* and in his travel diaries, already indicated that Le Corbusier wanted to update the problem of conceiving “[...] a coherent system: a system which proclaimed an essential unity” (Le Corbusier, 2004, p. 18).

Committed to rethinking the decimal system as a global measure since the French Revolution, an abstraction without corporeality – according to the architect – the return to the body as a referential measure means for Le Corbusier the reunion of man with his habitat, his comfort and, as a model of beauty and harmony, because

[...] mathematics [is] the source of that harmony which moves us: beauty (appreciated, let it be understood, by the human eye in accordance with a well-

understood human concept; there cannot and could never be another criterion). (Le Corbusier, 2004, p. 19).

On the other hand, it was also a question of responding to a demand from industrial times, in other words, thinking of a common measure for the mass production of objects and furniture. However, the *Modulor*, as a “[...] measuring tool based on the human body and on mathematics” (Le Corbusier, 2004, p. 55) and distinct from the treatise writers’ schemes, which were based on an idealized figuration, arose from the union of geometric rules with the choice of a specific male body. As the architect points out, quoting Marcel Py, one of his collaborators: “The values of the ‘Modulor’ in its present form are determined by the body of a man 1.75 m. in height. But isn’t that rather a *French* height?” (Le Corbusier, 2004, p. 56). In the second version of the book, the body of a Caucasian man of 1.83 m is chosen as the standard of measurement. And despite the revision, these body references are too narrow considering the architect’s declared intention to achieve universality.

Not only the norms of modern architecture embodied in the figure of *Modulor* touched on gender issues. Discussions about modern materiality and ornamentation also reinforced, as Joel Sanders (1996) comments, the notion of a masculine imperative. The treatment of building surfaces in white paint was associated with hygiene, logic, essentialism and austerity, in other words, attributes that are commonly linked to the masculine field. Even the internal division of spaces and the coverings applied to them were supposed to symbolically reflect masculine strength and reason. Libraries, bars and corporate environments, spaces where masculinity is exercised, were given wood paneling. For furniture, steel and leather were finishes that carried the values of industrial masculinity. Resources used in the modernist architect’s own projects, as Joel Sanders (1996) points out:

Le Corbusier derived his lexicon of materials from buildings types mainly inhabited by man (factories and monasteries) as well as from the traditionally male domain of transportation (cars, ships, airplanes). But while these materials directly recall male environments, they also more subtly convey the social values associated with them. (Sanders, 1996, p. 14).

Although both ancient treatises and modern manuals sought solutions that would order and determine good architecture, taking the body as the primary element and analogy, these writings contribute to narrowing and framing the physical and behavioral qualities inherent to man. Guided by the discourse of reason, the ordering of space and the achievement of beauty, man’s body in the historiography of architecture fulfills the Pythagorean foundation of being the measure of all things. However, as we have seen, it is not a question of celebrating the masculine, but of restricting and reducing the field of what is meant by man and the male body. On the one hand, the body desired and depicted in the diagrams was solid, rigid, virile, vigorous, slender, geometric, functional and unadorned. On the other, austerity, rationality, thoughtfulness and balance embody the masculine character. Any other factors outside this delimitation did not belong in the narrow place of beauty and architectural harmony.

3 The narrow place of the masculine

Historiography shows the changes in architectural practice over the years. The contexts, the formal results, the techniques employed, the motivations, the social organizations involved and the symbols all change or are transformed. However, the male body, from

Vitruvius to Le Corbusier, was repeatedly used as a resource for mimicry in architecture. It is curious to note that in this historical journey few changes have been made to what determines the nature of masculinity. Even with different versions and proportional combinations, architecture helped to distance the male from any trait that associated him with tortuosity, organicity and decoration, as these were exclusively feminine attributes.

In the field of the visible, mathematics defined which bodies were suitable as models. Thus, geometric objectivity was what united the perfection of nature with architecture through the modulation of the body. However, the canonical proportion not only defined the standards for buildings, but also reinforced the parameters of beauty and masculinity that have lasted until the present day. In the symbolic field, this determination helped to solidify the codes, posture and behavior accepted for men.

Although the canonical male body in architecture delimits the territory convenient to the universe of man, it is an abstract, idealized body that does not exist in matter. For Stewart (1997), the ideal representation of man in antiquity was not based on observing and copying the bodies of ordinary men. For the author (Stewart, 1997), this finding is not inaccurate. After all, paleontological studies examining the osteological evidence of Greek men have indicated that their structure and proportion do not coincide with those of statuary representations. Therefore, perfect corporeality is a “work of culture” and, as such, has a certain degree of arbitrariness. In their words (Stewart, 1997):

As a leading authority on Greek palaeopathology notes: [...] “[The inhabitants of Greece] does not coincide with the idealized representation of the human body in Greek sculpture. [But] although the average man had neither the slender grace of a statue of Apollo nor the force concentrated in on of Herakles, he did have supple, vigorous body attuned to the grind of daily life.” So all these images are fantasies, metaphorical constructs intended to express a particular politics of truth about the human condition. (Stewart, 1997, p. 12).

A model that aims to achieve universality, eternity and true beauty. In other words, an impossible body, whose existence is only at the level of the ideal. It is an *idea* in the Platonic sense. According to the philosopher, sensible reality in art and architecture consisted of a mere degraded copy of the perfection and eternity of ideas, since these could only be reached by the intellect.

In this sense, Erwin Panofsky (1968) comments that Cicero in *Orator* argues that artistic representation in its perfection could not be captured by the eyes or by any other sense, because there is no perfect model in sensible and empirical reality. The perfect image exists only in the artist’s soul. That’s why the sculptor Phidias, when portraying Zeus, the ultimate symbol of beauty and masculine power, didn’t choose any man for inspiration, but turned only to his soul to seek the essence of beauty. Therefore, the artist

[...] in his own mind there dwells a glorious prototype of beauty upon which he, as a creator, may cast his inner eye. Although the absolute perfection of this inner model cannot enter into the work he creates, the finished work will reveal a beauty that is more than a mere copy of an attractive “reality” (which is presented only to the easily deceived senses), yet something else than the mere reflection of a “truth” essentially accessible only to the intellect. (Panofsky, 1968, p. 13).

From Vitruvius to Le Corbusier, the harmonious body scrutinized by architecture, whether to achieve a mythical symbolism or because of the need for standardization focused on industrial production, refers to an unattainable corporeality. However, what escapes these

measurements and proportions escapes the field of beauty and the behavioral model that defines the correct way to be a man. With no escape, it's tempting to ask: What would happen if we broke the rules? What if we ran away from what has been designed – and in a way imposed – by tradition? What if we stopped trying to achieve unattainable beauty and masculinity?

In fact, we can go further: what would happen if we twisted the rules? Inverting their presuppositions? What if masculinity could refer to the curves and delicacy of an Ionic column and not the hardness of a Doric one? Or better still: what if beauty were sought not in a universe of the eternal and the unattainable? What if beauty lived precisely in the variety and inconstancy that we encounter in our everyday bodies? What if we recognized in everyday life the figures and images that occupy museum spaces? What if beauty wasn't the rigid division between feminine and masculine, but was precisely recognized in the fusion, the diffuse, the in-between of these two things?

Roland Barthes, in *The Neutral* (2005), presents a possible way out of the models of radical splits that determine standards, norms and concepts. In this book, derived from a lecture course given in 1978 at the *Collège de France*, Barthes investigates the incidence of inflections in literary and philosophical discourse that circumvent any paradigmatic structure, in other words, everything that encloses or defines one meaning to the detriment of others, which he calls "Figures."

The *Neutral* is a free field of research into figures that reflect the polymorphous, what escapes paradigms and the fixity of determination and dogmatic space. Also called scintillations and nuances, these figures show examples of evasion of paradigmatic capture, either by denouncing conflicting modes of discourse or by corresponding to forms of suspension of binarism. They are a survey of a textual *corpus* that exposes the semantic distinctions present in the same term. By not pointing out any predilection or hierarchy between the meanings presented, Barthes intends to combat the uniqueness and imposition of discourses by neutralizing them. It is a topical investigation, in Barthes' words (2005, p. 8), which does not aim to produce results. It is research with discourses that "do not censor effects but do not care about results" (Barthes, 2005, p. 17). However, it is not the emptiness or denial of meaning that the author points out as an alternative to rigid discourse. With the screening of *The Neutral*, we are only led to a semantic opening, a "polymorphous" field. A fluctuation of meaning.

In order to do this, the theorist presented just over twenty figures from *The Neutral* in a discontinuous manner, without any methodological order or conceptual sequence, each of which was registered by a name. One of the figures in particular interests us in terms of thinking about the expansion of the place of masculinity and femininity: the figure of the androgyne.

[...] The androgyne thus is the Neuter, but a Neuter conceived as the complex degree: a mixture, a dose, a dialectic, not of man and woman (genitality) but of masculine and feminine. Or better yet: the man in whom there is feminine, the woman in whom there is masculine. [...] Neuter (if it's a man who speaks): = man dipped, bathed in femininity (like a blade dipped in certain waters). [...] (Barthes, 2005, p. 193).

Other similar proposals can be found in the arts. These contemporary experiments invite us to react to the paradigmatic tradition that defines bodies and the terrain of masculinity. They also suggest some provocations: What happens if we put other bodies in places

where the traditional canon is expected to be represented? What if these bodies are more elastic? After all, what can a male body do?

4 An elastic masculinity

Without trying to replace the traditional paradigm of masculinity coined by architecture with another formatted model, we believe that some expressions of contemporary art can contribute to broadening architectural criticism about the limits and determinations set by the system. After all, it is also within the scope of the theoretical field to challenge the construct models and their symbolic orders, as well as to question the cultural role that architecture plays in the social body. And, finally, to re-propose configurations that accommodate more plural manifestations.

On the international scene, artist Cindy Sherman presented ten photographic records of her own body at the Metro Pictures Gallery in 2020. In this series, the artist, known for having been influenced by the make-up techniques of drag queens, sometimes uses effects that reinforce stronger, squarer expressions, and sometimes highlights more delicate, rounded contours. To pose, she incorporates poses, attitudes and clothing associated with the male universe (Figure 3). The people portrayed express haughtiness, robustness, seriousness and solidity. However, contrary to the norms of the architectural system, which associate these characteristics with the male body, the artist proposes an ambiguity.

Figure 3: *Untitled #615* (2019), by Cindy Sherman. Dye sublimation print, 177.8 cm x 216.5 cm.

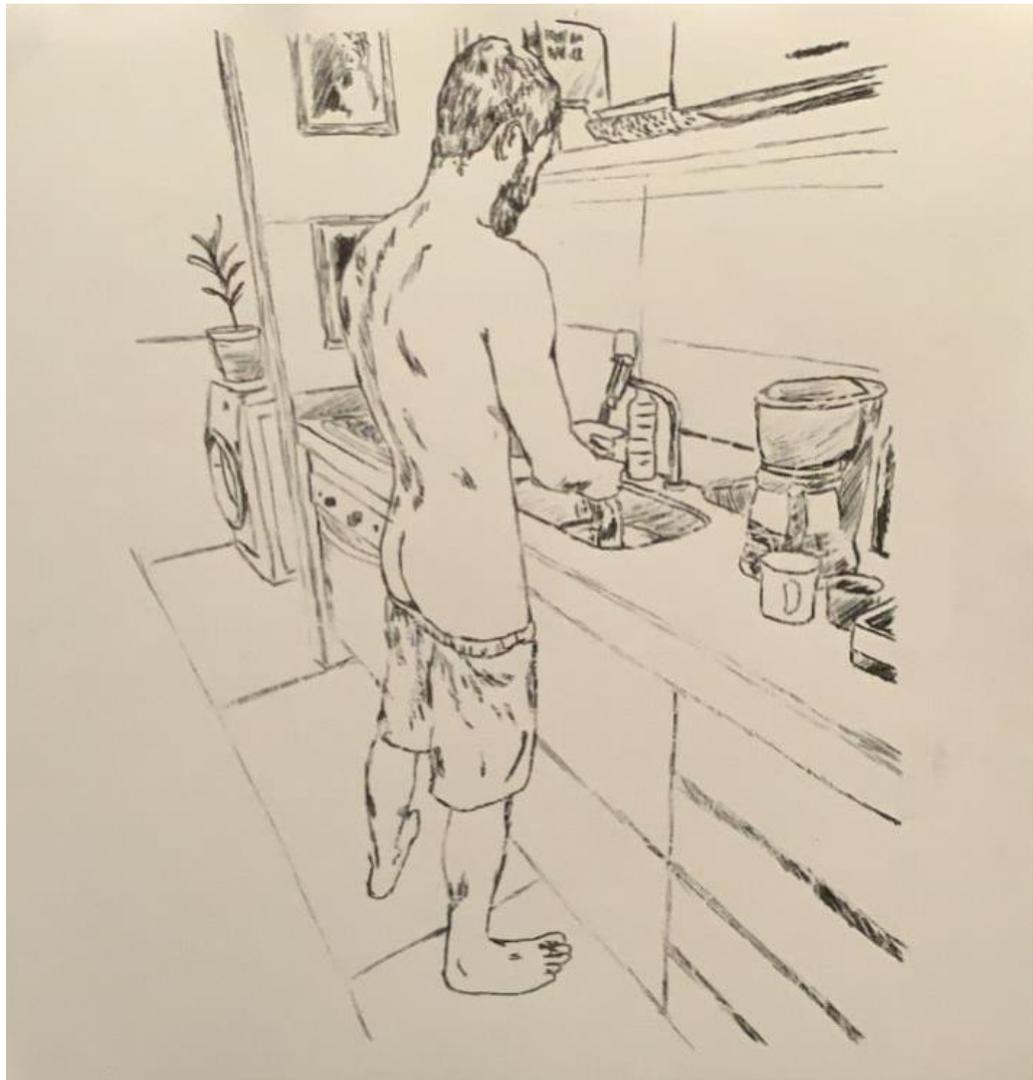


Source: Metro Pictures. Available at <https://www.metropictures.com/exhibitions/cindy-sherman20/selected-works?view=slider#9> (Accessed 29 September 2025).

These figures would appear masculine to the untrained eye. But when you look at the details of the images, such as the slender body, the skinny, elongated fingers, the fine facial features – features commonly associated with women – they become more prominent. With these enigmatic characters, the artist puts into abeyance the rigid division between the representation of the female and male body. Here the binary categories of gender (Figure 3) are mixed and confused. Curiously, all the works do not have names, leaving it up to the viewer to find an identity for the characters.

In the national context, Helder Amorim from Goiás is researching the materialities of printmaking in order to produce images about masculinity and virility. On his journey, the artist photographs his own body in the intimate spaces of his home and then reconstructs these images using various printing techniques. He represents himself in settings more commonly associated with the feminine: bathrooms, kitchens, living rooms surrounded by plants, pictures and ornaments (Figures 4 and 5). Here, manliness and the male body occupy the place of the domestic, the intimate, the careful and the meticulous. And with this, he proposes a shift: the male, who usually occupies social and public places, now occupies the spaces and activities related to care in private environments.

Figure 4: *Untitled* (2020), by Helder Amorim. Graphite on paper, 17 cm x 11 cm.



Source: Image provided by the artist.

Figure 5: *Untitled* (2020), by Helder Amorim. Digital painting.



Source: Image provided by the artist.

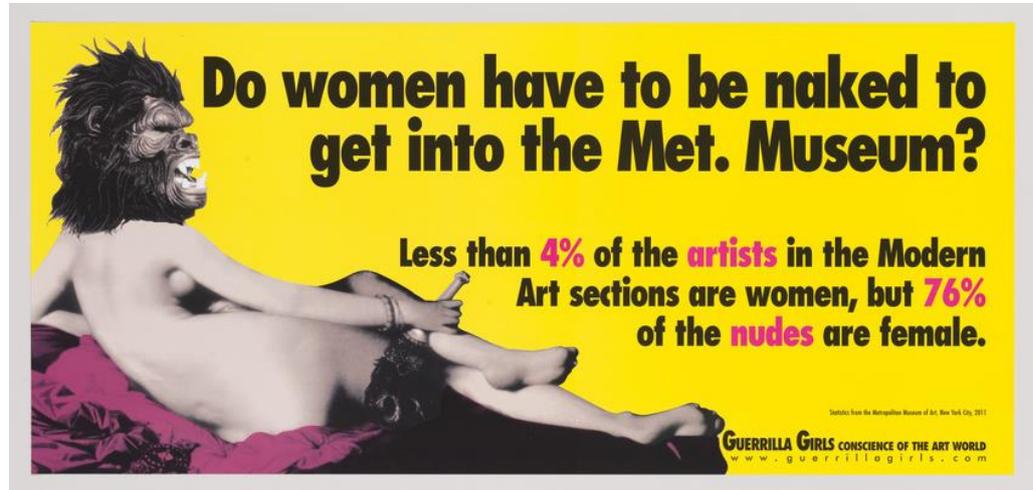
Faced with these self-images, Amorim experiments with the effect of gouge or graphite on various surfaces to represent the strong outlines of a male body. The larger man, broad and robust, is not just an aesthetic choice, but according to Amorim (2021), it is a corporeality that dialogues better with the material involved in the engraving process. In his words: “men who were too perfect didn’t look interesting in the stains of my engravings” (Amorim, 2021, p. 54). There is, however, a tension in the artist’s images: on the one hand, the image portrayed is that of a strong, robust body, on the other hand, it is an engraving printed on paper, a fragile, sensitive medium that does not allow ferocity in its treatment.

Also, by capturing private moments, Helder allows the viewer to become a voyeur watching the model-artist from behind the keyhole: a naked man, haughty and serene, but often exposed in erotic and homoaffective poses and contexts. Nudity⁵ when associated with sensuality and sexuality, it is worth remembering, historically has been explored more in art and architecture through the female body. Whereas male nudity is associated with

⁵ For further reading on nudity, see *The Nude* by Kenneth Clark (1959). It is important to note that nudity has taken on different forms throughout the history of art and has not always been associated with a moral issue. In Greek antiquity, as Clark (1959, p. 49) points out: “It expresses above all their sense of human wholeness. Nothing that related to the whole man could be isolated or evaded; and this serious awareness of how much was implied in physical beauty saved them from the two evils of sensuality an aestheticism.”

power, confidence, strength and idolatry. This mismatch is explored by the feminist group of artists Guerrilla Girls (Figure 6). In the nudity proposed by Amorim, there is a shift in the place of male exposure: the man is now object of desire.

Figure 6: *Do Women Have to Be Naked to Get into the Met. Museum?* (2012), by Guerrilla Girls. Poster, Sheet: 12 1/16 × 26 1/16in. (30.6 cm x 66.2 cm).



Source: The Whitney Museum of American Art. Available at: <https://whitney.org/collection/works/46999> (Accessed 29 September 2025).

Another case in point is the exhibition “Elástica Dimensão Viril: Desenhos e Esculturas” [Elastic Virile Dimension: Drawings and Sculptures] by artist and architect Ronaldo Paixão, which brought together sketches, sculptures and frame-by-frame animations. The group of works was inspired by Levan Akin’s feature film *And Then We Danced* (2023). The film portrays the journey of a Georgian ballet dancer who, in an attempt to join the Georgian National Ballet, pushes his body to the limit. The limit of his own body and the limit of fatigue, an effort to fit his body into a specific and narrow dance format. An effort to make himself fit where there seems to be no room. In the process, he discovers that his body is not just an instrument to give life to the traditional and normative ballet, but is also a real body that strains these norms by finding desire and pleasure in the other. And as a result, he finds a little more of himself.

In the first few seconds of the film, an excerpt from a Georgian ballet performance is shown, a black and white scene with poor image quality – which leads us to believe that the image must be from the early 20th century. And with a dry cut, another frame appears, closed and focused on the face of the protagonist Merab rehearsing. As the frame opens, we see that all the participants are wearing the same black clothes and their hair is very similar. The uniform, we know, is the mark of indistinction. However, the rehearsal and the music are interrupted by the teacher who announces: “You’re too soft. You must stand erect like a monument” – referring to the protagonist Merab. He then adds: “You must express purity, virginal purity” – referring to his partner. On the one hand, erect, strong, firm, powerful: what is commonly attributed to the male. And on the other, by opposition: purity, delicacy and lightness, which is related to the feminine.

At the end of the film, the protagonist, wearing clothes that set him apart from the uniformed group, discovers a new way of dancing that fluctuates between “masculine” and “feminine” steps and moves (Figure 7). Merab, however, does not abandon the lessons that formed him as a dancer, but he escapes polarities. In dance and in his body, he shuffles these places fixed by norms and tradition without completely abandoning them.

Figure 7: Theatrical release poster for the movie *And Then We Danced* (2023), y Levan Akin.



Source: Festival do Rio. Available at: <https://www.festivaldoriorio.com.br/br/filmes/and-then-we-danced> (Accessed June 2024).

A similar process takes place in Ronaldo's work, because as Merab he operates in the field of the tradition from which he was formed. As an architect, he establishes the body as a parameter and drawing as an instrument. That's why he draws these bodies in large sizes, almost to a full scale. And like the columns, these images create spatiality, because they also function in relation to other bodies - those of the visitors. However, he departs from tradition by representing a massive, dense, hairy man, whose proportions escape the norms of Polykleitos. And unlike his rigid masculine posture, this body dances, jumps, writhes and in doing so creates organic movements and volutes that remind us of the femininity of the Ionic columns.

Radical rejection of tradition, therefore, is not a way out, because as Barthes (2005) shows, complete suppression is also a way of imposing new paradigms or parameters. Thus, Merab, Ronaldo Paixão, Cindy Sherman and Helder Amorim, in abandoning this unattainable effort to reach an ideal, operate from tradition. Or rather, they play and explore with tradition. And in it, they propose folds, deviations and elasticity and, in doing so, put a strain on the canonical structures of masculinity reinforced by the history of architecture. They are works that draw Neutrals in the Barthesian sense. Here, the word elasticity gains weight. The escape of these artists is precisely that: to give what was rigid another dimension, a possibility, an elasticity. And elastic is expansion. It's that which extends, which gains a new field, a new terrain. It's extending in order to have space. It is, above all, the expansion or indetermination of the meaning of beauty and architecture and in the masculine.

5 Conclusion

By examining the treaties on which the principles of Western architecture and urbanism were based, Diana Agrest (1988) diagnoses an ideological duality in the world of architecture. These are the precepts and orders that link the body to architecture and act as a proportional, geometric parameter and as a symbolic category. The inner side of the "architecture system" is occupied by the masculine and the male body. This, although it has undergone some transformations throughout history, has remained the fundamental foundation of disciplinary thought since Vitruvius. The feminine and the female body belong to the outside.

It's an arrangement, therefore, in which not everyone has the chance to fit in. In this scenario, the author identifies the field of architecture and urbanism as a cultural power that reinforces the hierarchy and prominence of the male figure to the detriment of the female. In agreement with Agrest (1988), we also understand that this division is not only between genders, but also selects the body and the male figure accepted as exemplary. The interior of the system is therefore reserved only for the model of masculine perfection that meets a certain bodily and behavioral structure.

In order to do this, we looked at some of the architectural treatises and manuals that take the relationship between the body and architecture as a fundamental premise, with the aim of understanding the construction of the architectural discourse that imposes and defines masculinity.

With Vitruvius, man's body was chosen as the link between architecture and the perfection of nature. Vitruvian man, built with geometric rigor and accuracy, is a mathematical abstraction, so that each part of his body corresponds to a play of proportion and modulation. Of particular note is the Doric column, the main constructive element of sacred buildings, which embodies and symbolizes the physical and moral aspects of man.

In the Renaissance, the link between the body and architecture became particularly relevant. In Alberti's books, the relationships of proportionality and the rule that the parts belong together remain similar to those drawn up by the Roman treatise. The requirement for standards of decorum reinforced the understanding that established virility, rationality, rigidity and power as the domain of the male.

While researching the buildings of antiquity, Le Corbusier proposed another standard to regulate architectural construction: the *Modulor*. Although he wanted to achieve

universality, he chose the size and body measurements of a Caucasian and French man as a reference. In addition to the Corbusian project of standardization combined with industrial logic, Joel Sanders (1996) comments on how functionalism contributed to associating materials and spaces with the male universe. Serious and austere environments were intended for men, and materials capable of evoking the masculine spirit, such as leather, wood and black granite, should be used to compose them.

It's worth noting that the suggested biographical journey doesn't aim to cover the entire extensive history of architecture. The aim is to identify the fundamental movements that contributed to the construction of the unitary and closed discourse that delimits what a man's body and masculinity are. Faced with the rigidity of this scheme, which is responsible for externalizing women's bodies and other manifestations of masculinity from the norms, the article proposes questioning the demarcation of the architectural system. To do so, it points to experiences in the field of art that put pressure on traditional representations of masculinity.

Through different paths, the artists play with ambiguity, displacement and expansion and challenge the norms that stipulate what is appropriate for men. In her portraits, Cindy Sherman ironizes the social terrain occupied by men by making accentuated use of clothing and poses recognized as masculine. However, she provokes strangeness with her figures that possess both feminine and masculine traits. Helder proposes the displacement of the masculine to the spaces of the home and activities attributed to the feminine sphere. The body he represents is sexualized and also accepts the passivity of being observed and instigated by the viewer. Finally, Ronaldo expands the figure of a body that escapes the metric propositions linked to the ideal of beauty and inserts delicate, light and organic gestures, apparently contradictory to heavy and chubby male bodies.

The concept of Neutral forged by Barthes therefore seems opportune. The French theorist, in the field of words, only signals the dogmatic aspect of the delimitations that attribute fixed meaning. His figures function as an opening, an exercise in indeterminacy that questions the crystallized representations and meanings that designate right/ wrong; internal/ external; beautiful/ ugly. In its exercise of "performance" (and not demonstration) of the Neutral, it goes beyond any intellectual sophistication, it is also like a philosophical "guide to life", an "introduction to living" that deviates from both the dogmatic position and the absence of a position (Barthes, 2005, p. 11). This, then, is the importance of the Neutral: by being exposed, it reveals itself as the opening that makes another moral conscience possible, an "interior" and "personal" morality that "no longer speaks at all, even softly" (Barthes, 2005, p. 28). The presentation of the Neutral, however, is not a systematic itinerary, in which one action necessarily follows from another, but is "a manner – a free manner – to be looking for" (Barthes, 2005, p. 8), a topical exposition of the Neutral's incidences.

By way of conclusion, based on the experience of art and Barthesian linguistics, we suggest that the field of architecture is also open, since its rules are not limited to building. But it is also a field of knowledge that echoes in the cultural and social spheres. Without indicating paths or solutions, the arguments presented here serve to stimulate disciplinary thinking in order to blur the hard boundaries of the architectural system that determine what is and isn't appropriate for men's bodies and masculinity.

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