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Erotic affair with the home

Book chronicles the great attraction of real estate

"What do college students talk about with their roommates? Sex. Twenty years later, what do they talk about with their friends and associates? Real estate. And with the same gleam in their eyes."

So begins *Sex and Real Estate: Why We Love Houses*, a fascinating volume by Marjorie Garber (Pantheon Books/Random House, \$35).

The book is a journey through literature, art, film, journalism and everyday experience that provides an analysis of the ways in which we think about our homes. Houses, says the author, have always occupied a central place in the imaginations of poets, writers and philosophers, as well as in the minds of architects, real estate agents, and home dwellers.

Sex and Real Estate also explores the cultural role of the house as lover, mother, body or self, fantasy, trophy, history and escape.

All of these observations are assembled to help make sense of the fantasies and longings we project on to our homes.

Garber says that real estate today is a form of yuppie pomography. Discussions at dinner parties and office parties, she says, always seem to revolve around house-hunting, outbidding and remodeling. True confessions swapped with friends over lunch are likely to be more about the hot housing market than the hot affair.

It's no coincidence, says Garber, that just looking at real estate can be alluring. No wonder high-end real estate circulars in the United States have begun to resemble the style of the aptly named *Penthouse* magazine, she says.

Today's boomers, she adds, have found that an interest in real estate can be both legitimate and legitimating: it's not immoral, illegal or fattening.

Garber compares today's real estate to show business, theatre, fashion and seduction, using witty accounts to support each essay. She discusses the history of home design, and the evolution of various rooms in the house.

Of course, the book is not entirely about sex. Garber's theme is that our houses represent our dreams of past and future, nostalgia and romance. She pinpoints fairly accurately the emotions people frequently attach to their homes.

Her perspective is that of a Harvard professor living in Cambridge and, although not terribly representative, it is, according to one reviewer, a worthwhile bathtub read.

Occasionally, the author relates an amusing tale, like the true story of the Utah polygamist who built a 35,000-square-foot house with 37 bathrooms and 31 bedrooms for his 10 wives and 28 children. "Believe me," he says, "there are cheaper ways to have sex."

Perhaps I have led a too-sheltered life, but I found the chapter on "The House As Body" particularly fascinating. Garber suggests the sexiest room in the house is anywhere but the bedroom. We learn that illicit sex in illicit places has its own allure in the world of sex and real estate.

The kitchen table, for example, was once a favourite sexual venue for writers of steamy romances.

I was surprised to learn of many seemingly innocent allusions to "certain" activities in the kitchen, such as the line from "I've Been Working on the Railroad": "Someone's in the kitchen with Dinah, strumming' on the old banjo."

I also enjoyed reading about a newly reported "custom": Nowadays, couples initiate each room of the house or apartment, or each substantial new piece of furniture, by making love in them, on them, or, in the case of dining room tables, under them.

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And what about the bedroom, the traditional venue for intimate activities? The bedroom itself, says Garber, has evolved from a place of sleep to a private retreat where the occupant can channel-surf, fax, complete an aerobic workout or gobble a pint of ice cream from the mini-fridge hidden in the armoire.

In the chapter entitled "The House as Mother," Garber sounds like the Harvard English professor she is, dealing in part with Freudian interpretations of the concept of home.

Sex and Real Estate is really a study of how and why we love houses.

Garber's thesis is that the house can be a primary object of affection and desire. Human desire, she says, extends beyond explanation or need - as witnessed by phrases such as "my dream house."

The house is the repository of our unmet needs, our unfulfilled dreams, our nostalgic longings. It doesn't really satisfy any of them, but - so the theory goes - that is why we get so much satisfaction in making the attempt.

In the process, we get to experience the very specific pleasures and pains that only a house can provide.

And we learn that the comparison between sex and real estate cuts both ways - a woman may describe her man as a "fixer-upper" - raw material that needs some work but might be a good investment for the future. On the other hand, realty synonyms for "fixer-upper" include not only "handyman special," but also "just needs love."

Once upon a time, "the earth moved" was the perfect sexual compliment, Garber notes.

Now it's likely to be the announcement - delivered with equal, sensual satisfaction - that the contractor has shown up and is on the job.

For some readers, *Sex and Real Estate* will be just so much boring psychobabble about the "edifice complex" by a writer who has become known as the kooky culture queen of Harvard.

For others, especially real estate agents, the book may be a fascinating glimpse into the psyches of homebuyers.

Either way, the book has become quite a hot property itself.

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