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What's Love Got To Do With It?
Adopting a love ethic to perform the critical differently

Brady Burroughs

You must understand though the criticism at hand
Makes my pulse react
That it's only the thrill of critique gone ill
When opposition's a fact
It's judgmental
Only habitual
Lest you try to ignore that it means more than that ooo
What's love got to do, got to do with it...

Have you ever been the one that publicly corrects a colleague or lecturer who insists on using the pronoun ‹he› when speaking of ‹the architect›? Have you ever been the one to raise concerns that all of the lecturers in a lecture series, as well as a majority of the architectural examples in the lectures by those lecturers are white, Western, and male? Have you ever been the one to suggest that a design jury, studio teaching team, or institutional leadership ought to be varied in gender? Have you ever been the one to point out that all of the assigned readings in your research course are written by dead, white, male authors? Have you ever been the one who challenges the charismatic guest critic who makes sexist/heterosexist assumptions during a design critique? Have you ever been the one to suggest that gender or ethnicity may have an effect on the assessment of student design projects or tenure and promotion? Have you ever been the one who points out the preferential treatment of male colleagues in relation to their female counterparts? Have you ever been the one to lose it on the poor guy who says ‹man› when he means human and still doesn't understand the difference? Have you ever been the one to call out a popular professor who mansplains your comment in a seminar, only to reformulate the exact same idea as his own, seconds later? In this case, you may know the feeling of being charged with ‹willfulness› and for ruining the atmosphere of the shared project that is architecture.

The background

In her book ‹Willful Subjects› (2014), feminist writer and independent scholar Sara Ahmed traces the historical, literary, and philosophical evolution of the relationship between will and authority, while she reflects on its connection to the idea of education.[1] Ahmed evokes the harrowing brothers Grimm fable ‹The Willful Child›, with the familiar ethos of ‹spare the rod, spoil the child›, as a description of the educational tradition originating in the Enlightenment period.[2] In this gruesome early model, learning was a ‹breaking of will› through harsh punishment, usually by paternal authority, with the objective of obedience to familial and social order.[3] In the name of love, this punishment and subsequent breaking of a strong will was justified as being ‹for the child's own good›.[4]

Ahmed suggests that over time, this violent ‹breaking of will› evolved into a ‹making of will› in a more liberal educational philosophy, replacing punishment with persuasion and rewarding the emulation of—or alignment with qualities and values held by those in positions of authority.[5] Rather than enforcing obedience through punishment, the willful figure was coerced into a self-imposed adoption of values to match those held by authority.[6] It goes without saying (but I'll say it anyway) that this model leaves the values deemed good or worthy unchallenged, and the power to determine these values uncontested.

How does this relate to architecture, more specifically architectural education? And ‹what's love got to do with it›?[7] In 1991, in her chapter ‹The Making of

an Architect›, architectural academic Dana Cuff wrote: «As the terminology indicates, crits are not two-way discussions: for the most part, students are the passive recipients of jurors' opinions. As a ritual, the crit teaches students that their work should be able to stand the test of harsh professional criticism, doled out by those with greater experience.»[8] Over a decade later, architectural academic and critic Naomi Stead wrote: «In a sense the traditional design critique, even given its long tradition and hallowed place in architectural education, can be seen as a rather blunt and unsophisticated instrumentalisation of criticism.»[9] Perhaps it's possible to begin to draw parallels between the authority/willful figures above and the relationship between the design student and the studio teacher or guest critic? Or maybe the graduate student and the supervisor? Or even the new faculty member and a senior researcher or professor in the department?

Architectural academic Helena Webster describes the socializing role of the crit as a staging of power and authority.[10] Imagine a typical architectural critique, where critics and/or teachers, students and student work gather in the common project of architectural education, all facing (literally and metaphorically) in the same direction as usual. The organization of these bodies and objects for an evaluation through criticism tend toward a familiar formation, and an implicit agreement, more or less, over the values used in the judgment of the work. A mass of student bodies (social order) sits in rows behind a few key critic/teacher figures (parental authority), all facing a wall of drawings, images and models (potential will) and a lone figure (willing/willful subject) receives praise/critique (reward/punishment), as architectural heroes and very rarely heroines (God-like figures) are referred to as an example worthy of emulation (moral good will). Sounds familiar? Webster claims that the staging of power in the ritual of the crit allows critics «to judge student performance against, and steer students' development toward, the critics' personal paradigms of disciplinary identity.»[11]

Perhaps this is part of the task of any education, to offer up models previously accepted by a discipline for emulation, but I wonder why critique and criticism remain the most prevalent form of learning and evaluating in design education. Although the academic atmosphere is undoubtedly more convivial today, where critique attempts to be more dialogical than oppositional, why do architectural design juries, at least in a European or North American context, generally follow the same set-up almost thirty years after Cuff published her seminal work? And what would happen if we didn't always align? To put it another way, are we necessarily teaching architecture students to be critical thinkers? Or are we merely teaching them how to imitate an accepted performance of critique and criticism? Are we encouraging a strategy where, as Webster argues, students avoid taking risks and learn to adopt what she calls ‹surface tactics›, in order to survive and eventually emulate that same performance?[12] I would go so far to posit that ‹obedience› or ‹alignment› to a given set of values, without a critical reflection on these values, will never lead to anything resembling critical thought.

In her pedagogical trilogy, feminist scholar bell hooks writes: «The mind motivated by compassion reaches out to know as the heart reaches out to love.»[13] In a call to choose love and connection over alienation and separation, hooks proposes adopting what she calls a ‹love ethic›.[14] hooks writes: «Embracing a love ethic means that we utilize all the dimensions of love [...] in our everyday lives. We can successfully do this only by cultivating awareness. Being aware enables us to critically examine our actions to see what is needed so that we can give care, be responsible, show respect, and indicate a willingness to learn.»[15] In terms of the architectural critique, adopting a love ethic might mean choosing mutual exchange and learning over critique and judgment or choosing an opportunity for generosity over mastery. I would argue that an entire education and discipline built on learning through critique and criticism does not come from, nor lead to, a place of generosity or embrace an ethics of love. At best, it is competent, critical, yet guarded, and at worst, it is fearful, competitive and alienating. Maintaining a love ethic requires vulnerability that a traditional culture of critique just isn't accustomed to offering.

The theme of love; however, is not uncommon in canonical critical and literary writing. For Freud, love was both a serious and committed endeavor; for Lacan, love was an unattainable and impossible project; and for Goethe's Faust, love was a perpetual waiting for and wanting something inherently unavailable.[16] This

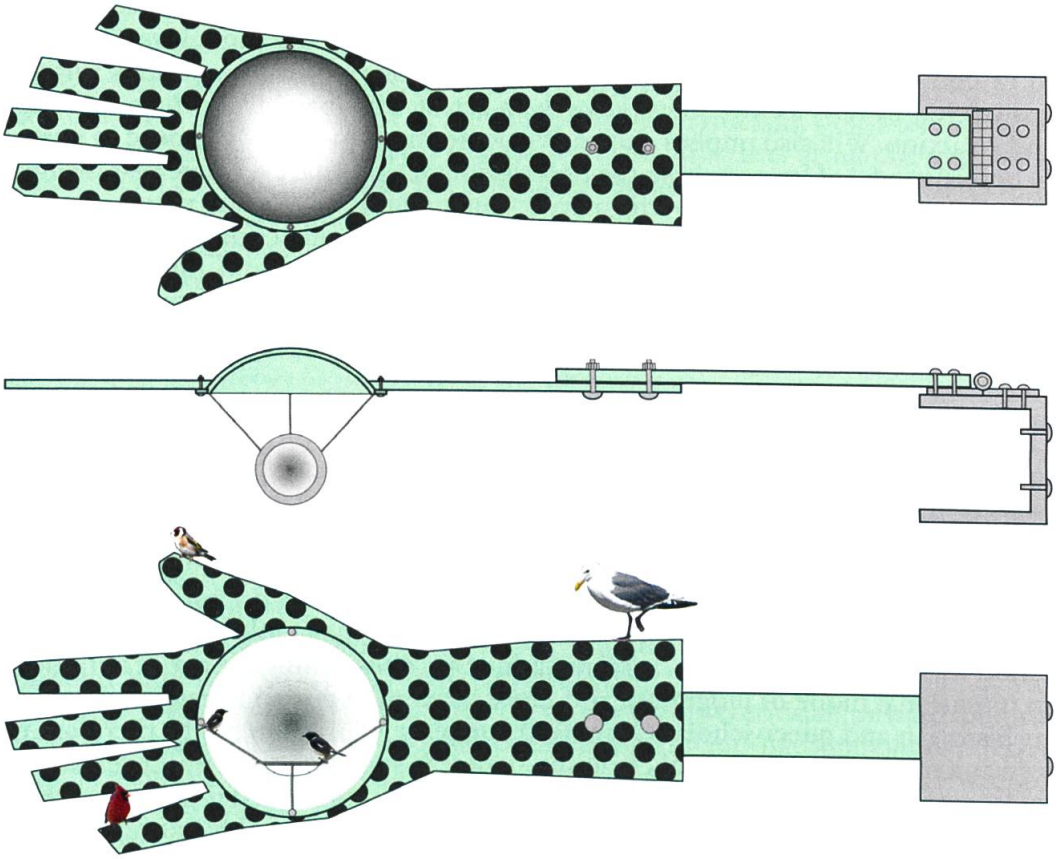
sentiment supports the myth of the suffering male genius, but what if we want something a tad less pessimistic? For bell hooks, on the other hand, love is «the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth [...] Love is as love does. Love is an act of will—namely, both an intention and an action. Will also implies choice. We do not have to love. We choose to love.»[17] In hooks' model of love, we have the description of a mutual exchange that includes and allows for vulnerability, performativity and willfulness. Rather than an impossible and moral dilemma, it is a reciprocal and intentional action, one that comes from a place of ethics and sees contradictions, partiality, and uncertainties as sources of possibility. And let's not forget, as the LGBTQ rights struggle has taught us (and continues to teach us), Love is political!

The project

In an attempt to shift architecture's culture of critique, I propose questioning relationships of power and privilege through practices that are explicitly queer, feminist, and Campy, in what I call ‹architectural flirtations›. Architectural flirtations operate in a mode of generosity and connection, rather than the judgment and alienation of conventional critique. To clarify, flirtations do not imply that no judgments are made, as judgments are a necessary and inevitable part of almost any action we take. Rather, architectural flirtations are questioning the act of critique as an intentional mode of judgment, and more often than not an unreflected one. As art historian and queer scholar Gavin Butt suggests: «Flirtation might therefore be seen as a model for practices of criticism—where it seems necessary and germane—to decentre the paranoid structures of serious analysis, or indeed to re-inflect them with a flirtatious, and playful, form of knowing.»[18] Architectural flirtations adopt a love ethic and offer an alternative mode where the criteria and values of judgment, as well as the position of the judge or the critic, are both contextualized and contested. Like a flirt, this architectural conversation requires reciprocity and is dependent on the engagement and vulnerability of both parts. It presents risky opportunities for mutual learning, rather than ideological power struggles aimed at ‹obedience› or ‹alignment›.

In a more particular architectural flirtation, and subject of my recently completed PhD thesis, I take aim at the values of a serious architectural discipline rooted in critique. What tends to be considered ‹serious›, has achieved this position because of certain norms or habits that are always tied to intersecting systems of

Aldo Rossi and Attilio Pizzigoni, Mozzo row house (Facade detail), Bergamo, 1977.
Photography: Brady Burroughs, 2015



Detail 2, ‹The Birdbath›. Design and drawing: Brady Burroughs, 2016

power. When I refer to ‹the serious›, or my desire to undermine ‹the serious›, I am talking about power! The power to decide what is correct, good, worthy, or valued. The power to take for granted, to assume, to uphold a system of values. With a little provocation and a lot of humor, this project takes seriously what we usually deem unserious in the architectural discipline, in order to undermine the ‹usual› order of things. In the spirit of an exaggerated, over-the-top, Campy approach inspired by Susan Sontag's ‹Notes on Camp›, this project is an attempt to «be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious» or to perform the critical differently.[19] Camp as a queer critical concept works through doubleness, in its ability to enact both affirmation and critique, co-optation and resistance, alienation and absorption, without overt opposition, giving rise to a form of parodic play. It confronts us with the question: Should I take this ‹seriously›, or not? (And yes, I must admit a certain amount of personal pleasure in submitting an article with pop icon and Swiss citizen Tina Turner's hit song as its title to the architectural magazine of ETH, an institution with quite a ‹serious› reputation!)

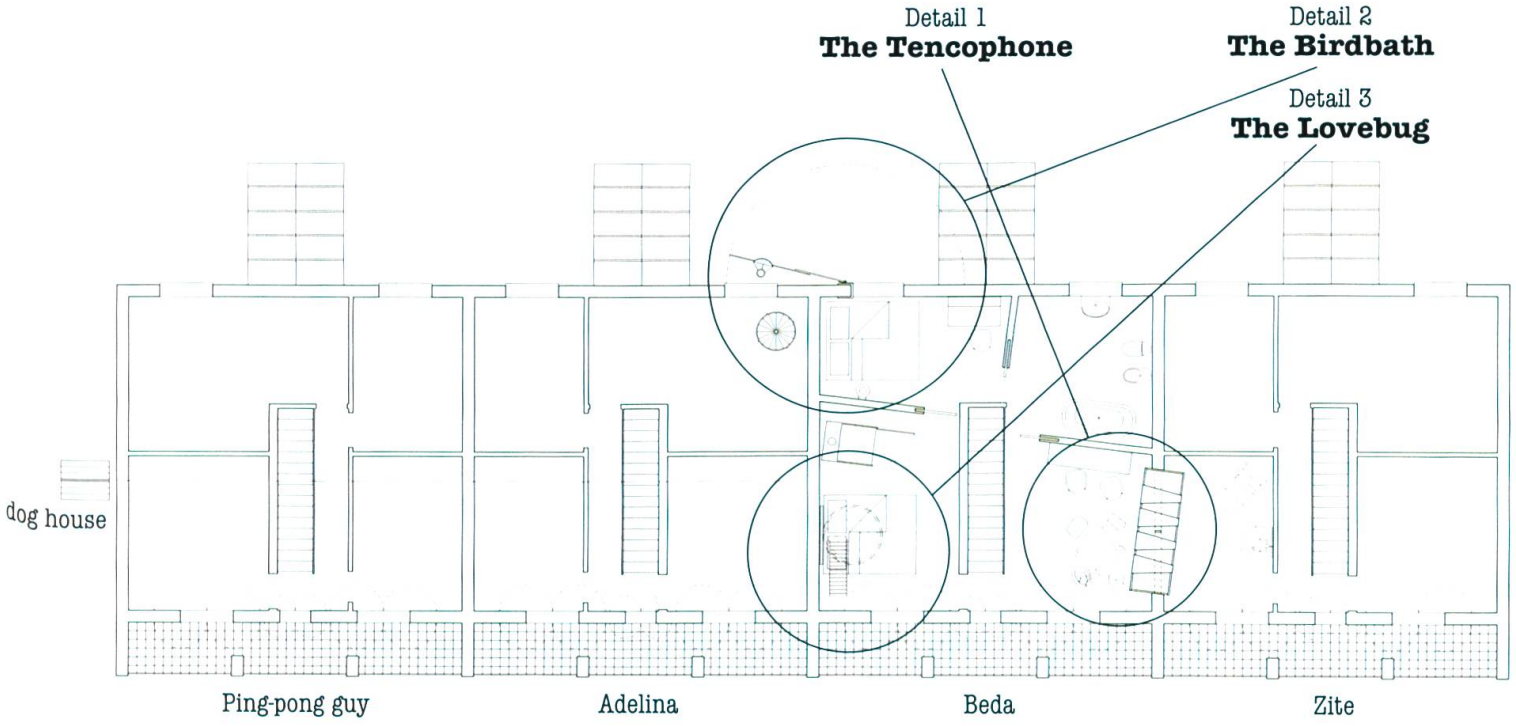
The published documentation of my project is a book titled ‹Architectural Flirtations: A Love Storey›, designed together with graphic designer Andrejs Ljunggren and with graphic illustrations by Iwa Herdensjö.[20] It's written and designed as an architectural pulp fiction that combines architectural design with critical theory and fiction. In order to write from a more situated position, I split my authorship into three distinct but overlapping personas, each with their own area of expertise; the researcher, the pedagogue, and the practitioner. Besides ‹the authors›, there are a string of other invented characters that also lend their voices to tell this critical-fictional tale. Central to the fiction, there is a row house in Mozzo, Italy, just outside of Bergamo, built in 1977 and designed by the architects Aldo Rossi and Attilio Pizzigoni. In the guise of character Beda Ring (the researcher), I take one of these row houses and renovate it in an unserious way, by setting up parameters for myself as if they were a design task you might encounter in a design studio. You could say that the Mozzo row houses are my ‹architectural object of affection›, or what I'm flirting with. Throughout the project, along with some of Aldo Rossi's own writings, this existing built work also acts as a stand-in for architectural design and discourse.

On the entrance floor, we find key additions such as a poodle profile baseboard, an indoor Japanese soaking pool, a professional wood fired pizza oven, and a LED lit disco ball, all equally absurd but completely possible. Immortalized in painted silhouettes on the wall are my central team of critical theorists; Gavin Butt, Jane Rendell, Sara Ahmed, and bell hooks, all boogying down in the newly renovated disco-library. In order to help program the physical changes in Beda's renovation, the fictional stories revolve around Beda (the Campy researcher and renovator), her three neighbors, and a ghost that's trapped in ‹purgatory› on the second floor of the renovated row house. On one end and sharing a common wall with Beda is Zite, the bohemian spinster who lives alone with her three cats. On the other side of Beda is Adelina, the Italian designer and neighbor from hell, who lives with her pet cockatoo. And at the far end, lives the ping-pong guy, whose main interest is the ping-pong table in his basement and taking care of the bull terrier who lives outside in the doghouse along the gable façade.

On the second floor, I, or rather Beda has designed three new acoustic details that interact with the neighbors to either side, as well as with some of our ‹companion species› (science, technology and feminist scholar Donna Haraway's term for our animal friends) in this residential area.[21] With a glance at the second floor plan, we can see that the renovated unit twists the original structure, while the details begin to connect and interact with the neighboring houses. For the sake of brevity, I will describe only one of the three details that form a connection between Beda's guest room and Adelina's Nordic design showroom, where her pet cockatoo Hugo is kept alone in his cage as part of the décor.

This detail, ‹The Birdbath›, is constructed with a satellite dish inset in the abstract figure of a hand, made of perforated sheet metal. Attached to a hinged metal arm, the entire construction is covered in the same verdigris color patina as the original details of the row house. It attaches to the opening of the window in Beda's guest room and swings over to the outside of the window to Adelina's showroom. Here it attracts local birds and provides a small bath and place to perch, while reflecting their chirping noises toward Hugo in order to keep him company. (As Beda and Adelina's neighborly relationship is riddled with conflict, despite the love shown to Hugo, this detail is also meant to irritate Adelina.)

In each detail, I continue my ‹flirt› with Aldo Rossi, by playing on elements from his other works and sketches in my design. For instance, this detail proposes the materialization of Rossi's sketch ‹La Finestra del Poeta a NY› from 1978 at the scale of 1:1. The sketch depicts a figure looking out of a window with the hand of The



Plan 02 (renovated), Mozzo row house. Design: Brady Burroughs, Drawing: Malin Heyman, 2016

San Carlone of Arona just outside, a towering hollow bronze statue that appears in many of Rossi's sketches and drawings as a giant green hand. The details also play on Rossi's love and fascination of animals, portrayed in his series of drawings such as ‹Natura morta›, ‹Anatomy of the Horse›, and ‹Dogs and some of my other friends›.[22] In this full-scale version, Adelina becomes the figure gazing out of the window, taunted by the chirping, confronted by the hand of the saint, and reminded of her pact with the devil at ‹Il Portone Del Diavolo›, a local Bergamo legend, to further her career.

Cue the music!
Oooooo
What's love got to do, got to do with it
What's love but a generous conversation
What's love got to do, got to do with it
Who needs critique when we can perform the critical differently

*This article is a reworking of excerpts previously published in Architectural Flirtations: A Love Storey (2016), which can be found in full pdf format on the KTH DiVA database:
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:kth:diva-194216

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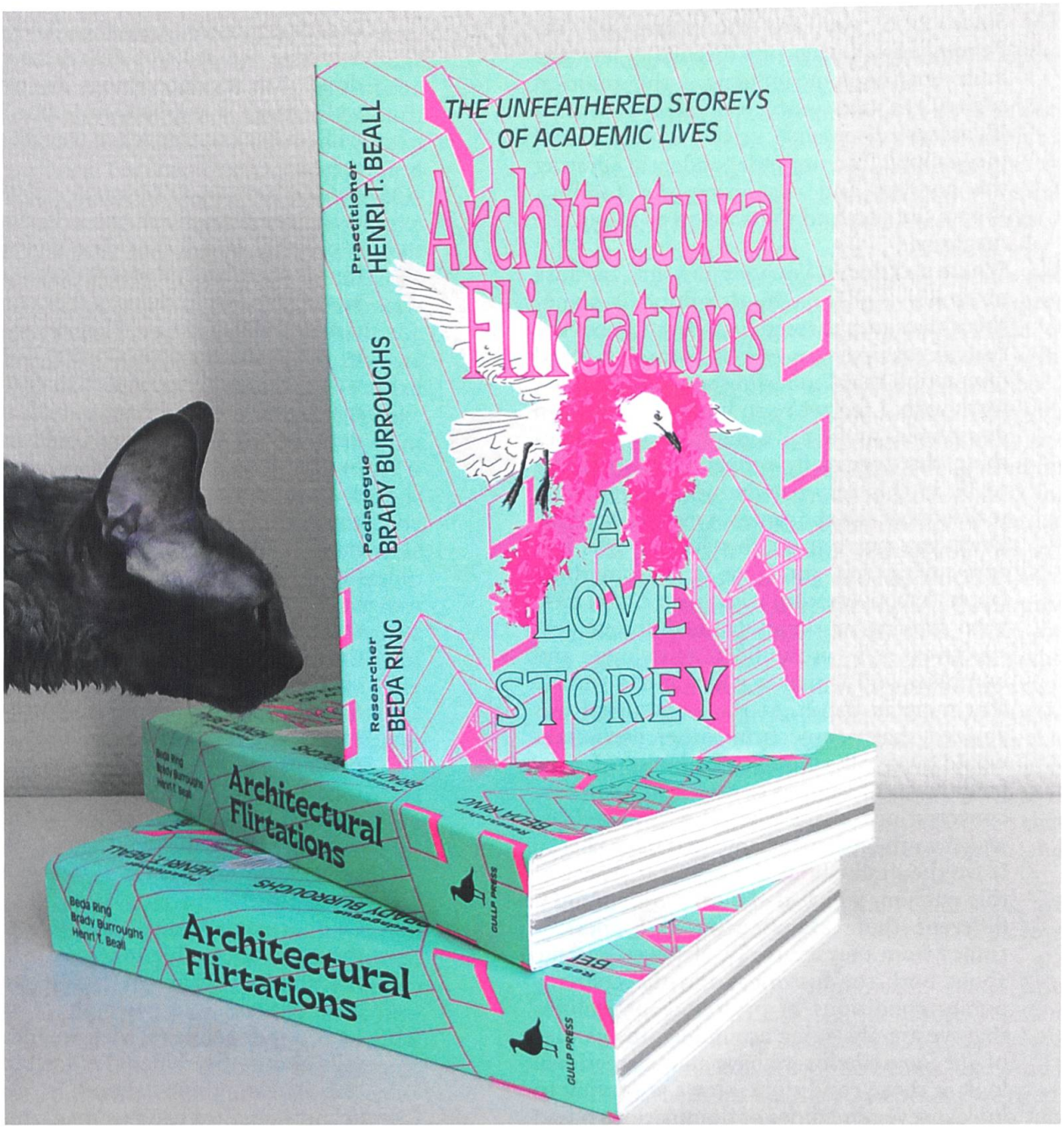

Architectural Flirtations: A Love Storey, 2016. Graphic design: Andrejs Ljunggren, Illustrations: Iwa Herdensjö