

BODY BUILDING

bSIDE6, October 1 through November 5, 2011
curated by Christine Taylor

“We have decided not to die.”

Begin at the skin, the 1.3 millimeter border between the body everything else. It takes no more than the slip of a chef's knife to remind us that skin's no lobster-like exoskeleton, no dense yak fur, no thick rhino hide. The most vulnerable of creatures, we thus unprotected move at not terribly quick speeds and are unable to fly away or climb or dig quickly enough to be anything like safe.

There is a children's story that imagines King Arthur as a boy under Merlin's tutelage. Merlin turns the boy into the mouse. And the author does an admirable job of putting a boy in a mouse's body—heart racing, muscles perpetually tense in pre-flight—and mind, all frantic response amped up by omnipresent and omnidirectional fear. With no possibility of safety, there is no possibility for the consideration of anything but safety. But of course I'm restating Abraham Maslow, who notes that in a state like this, “Practically everything looks less important than safety, (even sometimes the physiological needs which being satisfied, are now underestimated). A man, in this state, if it is extreme enough and chronic enough, may be characterized as living almost for safety alone.”

And safety begins with the skin, with setting up a defensive perimeter at this border, protecting it from frostbite and sunburn, let alone teeth and claws. So clothing and shelter (perhaps too obviously near the very foundation blocks of Maslow's hierarchy of needs) sought and improvised, later constructed.

But of course, when we talk about shelter and clothing, we most usually talk about architecture and fashion, because the one thing we have going for us, the one reason we're not, in fact, the most vulnerable of creatures, is a mind, a mind that isn't satisfied with rudimentary function, but capable of creative problem solving and what's more, creative expression. The protections the mind has devised for the body—the soft and hard, personal and communal—long ago ceased to be primarily practical in part because they did their jobs so well, freeing us from “living...for safety alone” and allowing the mind to turn to higher order concerns.

Moving out from the skin, what is the relationship between the body and the near space it inhabits? Does it matter what we cover ourselves with? Does it matter what kind of structure we inhabit? Or is it a matter of the roof above, the locking door, with the rest being curly flourish? How do our spaces, how do our garments shape us?

In the air at the Bauhaus in the 1920s was the idea of *Raumempfindung* or 'felt volume', the 'sensation of space.' Oskar Schlemmer conceived of a series of dance performances as a laboratory for exploring the movement of the body in space. Dancers moved, as if in a “space filled with a soft pliable substance” in a “spatial linear web,” their movements dictated by a stage space geometrically divided with bisecting lines meeting in the center of a circle on the stage, taut wires

criss-crossing the vertical space from stage to ceiling. Schlemmer explained, “out of the plane geometry, out of the pursuit of the straight line, the diagonal, the circle and the curve, a stereometry of space evolves, by the moving vertical line of the dancing figure.” At the same time, costumes devised by the Bauhaus workshops altered the ability of the body to move in space. Restrictive or cumbersome sculptural costumes, for example, forced the body into mechanized movements. The work of Schlemmer and colleagues suggests a reciprocal interaction: the body shaping space by inhabiting and moving in it (who hasn't experienced the softening of a hard, linear space as it is filled with bodies?), its movements in turn shaped by the space in which it moves (where space can be that within the confines of a garment or a room).

I would like to read a sociological study along the lines of William H. Whyte's work with public spaces in New York City that looks at how a space invites certain moves on the part of its inhabitants. You probably know of such a work and can recommend it to me. Christopher Alexander's *Pattern Language* gets at this in its informal and rather poetic way; his “gradients of intimacy” come to mind.

It's interesting to think about the Ouroburos nature of garment and dwelling as both expressing the shape of one's self (and here I use the word shape figuratively) and shaping the self...which is to say that as one makes choices about how to house the body, choices that are meant to say something about the self housed in that body, the choices also shape the body and through multiple feedback channels, the self. Let me give a very straightforward example that is maybe oversimple: if a bench in a space has a flat seat and a straight back, and if it is not off in a corner but overlooking a room, the body sitting on that bench, one might imagine, would perhaps tend to straighten its spine rather than slump both for physical and psychological reasons. This straightening may be read by others as saying something about the the mental state of that sitter, and the way others interact with that sitter will be altered as a result. The way the sitter feels, particularly as a result of altered interactions with others, as one aspect of its sense of self in that moment will be altered by the bench. Substitute high-heeled shoe for bench. Substitute hood. Here, to continue with how the sitter “feels,” one might address aesthetics, visual and tactile pleasure, comfort and beauty, and the feedback loops they generate. But it's such well-trodden ground....

Rather it is worth remembering and less discussed that this shaping of body and self by space and form is not an individual enterprise. One does not design all of one's own public and private spaces, not even one's own garments. And so to bear in mind a kind of matrix in which power and control (expressed or exercised) oppose freedom and autonomy (actual and apparent). And/or in the case of apparel, the expression that is going on is every bit as much about signaling and reinforcing hierarchy (class) as any kind of self-expression.

I am backing into meaning. But for every architectural solution of expression, whether of some sense of self as embodied in the hard or soft housing of the body or positive effort to shape the experience of the body and mind via the design of a space, there is a signal sent. In its reception, in perception and understanding (or lack thereof) meaning is made. And this can be a set of feelings, beliefs, peppered and influenced by memory; it can be vague and ethereal or a clean, clear message. As in any human expression, design being one of many, the straight line from intention to

understanding is illusive, and cause and effect becomes rather a game of telephone with ultimately uncertain outcomes. Bearing that in mind, have we inventoried the possible factors that distort the signal? Do we have an awareness of all that can sideline the best of intentions? Speaking [sic] of intentions, what of philosophy, of the ethics of space, of what it means that a society houses the body as it does both privately and publicly. (See “matrix” above).

If maintaining safety for humans can be agreed upon as a universal good, what if the housing for a body could do more than temporarily maintain safety in the interim between birth inevitable death. What if building could shape or reshape body so profoundly that it could rewrite the end of the story, extending safe existence indefinitely? This was the project of artist Arakawa and his partner, Madeline Gins. With their notion of “reversible destiny,” they imagined an architecture that could interrupt perception and the experience of the body in space to such a degree that the natural plasticity of both brain and the rest of the organism might kick in to eventually achieve immortality. This manifested, yes, in walls through bathtubs, bumpy floors, and low doorways. But these gestures exemplify the ultimate call for a conception of building as more than space for body as does the artists' six-word manifesto (with its echoes of the pre-speech motivations of the first of our ancestors to seek safety in shelter from a lightning storm in a cave): “We have decided not to die.”

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