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An Architectural Exhibition: “Bench with the Film of its Own Making”

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“In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.” (Genesis, 3.19)

Introduction:

This paper describes a design-and-build studio project carried out at the University of Nottingham with students in their fourth year - although elements of it could also be considered appropriate for the 'Beginning Design Student'. The programme for the project is based on the premise that there is a fundamental continuity between the human body and the rest of the world. This idea has been around for some time and appears in a variety of forms: The Biblical quotation above which suggests a material connection between body and earth; the early medical theories of Hippocrates which describe the influence of the environment on the four humours of the body; and James Lovelock's Gaia theory which describes the earth as a living and self-regulating body-like organism. In addition to the more or less scientific similarities such as between bone and rock, or blood and seawater, recent work in the visual arts has also provided new insights into the body's peculiarly 'unstable' materiality. Andres Serrano's *Blood and Soil* (1987), Stelarc's *Stomach Sculpture* (1994), and Mona Hatoum's *Deep Throat* (1996) all suggest a body in a state of flux - a continual process of interaction between the body and its environment.

Background:

In order to explain the significance of this idea for the way we design buildings I want to talk about two aspects of the relationship between architecture and the human body - the relationship between buildings and their makers and that between buildings and their users. By making this distinction I would also like to question the common fixation on tectonic expression and instead try to draw out some of the lessons that a theory of materiality might suggest for the understanding of building use.

This 'theory of materiality' emerges from the first of my two relationships between architecture and the human body, through the stories that buildings can reveal about their making and ultimately about their makers. This is an important component in the development of human self-awareness, and is based on the notion that meaningful knowledge is created from the experience of reaching out and engaging with the physical and social world. This idea that we come to really

know the world only through the process of acting on it, is a notion that has been developed within the philosophy of phenomenology as well as more recently in the social sciences. As a useful starting point, Henri Bergson in the book called *Matter and Memory* first published in 1892, (Bergson, 1988) suggested that: “the objects which surround my body reflect its possible action upon them” (Bergson, 1988: 21). Bergson's argument implies that our perception of the things around us is dependent on the body's capacity to transform them. Echoing the Kantian schema of the a priori structures of perception that limit our potential knowledge of the external world, Bergson begins to propose a new framework for understanding the concepts that we have about the things around us. Taking the action of the body as the ultimate root of knowledge of the world, he suggests that our physical engagement with the 'stuff' that surrounds us provides both the source and the limits of our understanding of it. Secondly, if the actions of the body determine what (as well as how) we can know about the 'external' world, then this same external world - having been acted on in a variety of ways - must be an equivalent source of knowledge about the capacities of the body.

Buildings can communicate this story of the body's encounter with the material world through their articulation of joints and junctions as well as the worked surface patterns of their materials. A kind of continuity is suggested here between the built object and the absent maker, whose presence is implied in a metonymic way, by the traces of tool-marks left in the surface. This 'absent body' is also suggested by the way in which objects are shaped for a purpose, providing evidence of the intentionality of the maker in accommodating the bodies of future users. This point hints at the second of my two relationships with the body and I will return to this later in the paper.

In terms of the first relationship, the kind of symbiosis between the body and the world suggested in Bergson's *Matter and Memory*, also forms the basis of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's more recent concept of the 'chiasm', described in the unfinished work entitled *The Visible and the Invisible* published posthumously in 1964 (M-Ponty, 1968). The chiasm, or the intertwining, of the organism and its perceptual environment, presents the body as a kind of interface between the mind and the outside world. Discussing the preoccupations of the painter Paul Cézanne, he also describes the role of the artist's body in the representation of the world, accepting that, as “we cannot imagine how a mind could paint. It is by lending his

body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings." (M-Ponty, 1964: 162). The interface between body and world that takes place through the medium of the paint provides the philosopher with a model for all perceptual activity: the mind's access to the 'outside' world must inevitably arise from the body's movement in it, which also necessarily involves a movement of it:

"Visible and mobile, my body is a thing among things; it is caught in the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing. But because it moves itself and sees, it holds things in a circle around itself. Things are an annex or prolongation of itself; they are encrusted into its flesh, they are part of its full definition; the world is made of the same stuff as the body." (M-Ponty, 1964: 163).

Merleau-Ponty's most famous example is that of the blind person navigating with the aid of a stick, where the stick, like a carpenter's tool, gradually becomes an extension of the arm that holds it.

For a development of this notion towards the area of architectural aesthetics, the writings of John Dewey provide another useful reference. As he describes in *Art as Experience* published in 1934:

"The epidermis is only in the most superficial way an indication of where an organism ends and its environment begins. There are things inside the body that are foreign to it, and there are things outside of it that belong to it *de jure* if not *de facto*; that must, that is, be taken possession of if life is to continue. On the lower scale, air and food materials are such things; on the higher, tools, whether the pen of the writer or the anvil of the blacksmith, utensils and furnishings, property, friends and institutions - all the supports and sustenances without which a civilised life cannot be. The need that is manifest in the urgent impulses that demand completion through what the environment - and it alone - can supply, is a dynamic acknowledgment of this dependence of the self for wholeness upon its surroundings." (Dewey, 1934: 59)

It is here where Dewey opens up this notion to the scale of tools and buildings, that the issue extends from one of tectonics towards the second of my two relationships with the body - the question of patterns of use and the appropriation of space. The same urge to take possession of things in the environment - taking ownership of them as Dewey actually implies - creates a desire to reach out and manipulate the things around us and from this experience, create new knowledge. In spatial terms this is reflected in the use of tools and equipment, which become extensions of the capacity of the body and part of Merleau-Ponty's chiasm, or 'flesh of the world'.

A number of corollaries suggest themselves that might better explain this jump between fields, not least of which is Martin Heidegger's categorisation of object relationships in *Being and Time*. Heidegger himself used a similar two-part schema of body-object engagement, in order to classify the objects around us according to the way the body interacts with them. Objects are either 'present-at-hand', in which case they

demand to be contemplated and interpreted, or they are 'ready-to-hand' like tools or equipment which have to be picked up and manipulated - thereby becoming extensions of the body like Merleau-Ponty's blind person's cane, (Heidegger, 1962: 95-102). In Heidegger's first category come works of art, and also anything in the natural world - at least until they become fuel or raw material, as in the 'standing reserve' of Heidegger's later essay *The Question Concerning Technology*, (Heidegger, 1993). This formulation has been influential particularly in the philosophy of technology, and was used by the American phenomenologist Don Ihde, when he set out the two major modes of engagement with technology, (Ihde, 1990: 72-97). The first, mirroring Heidegger's 'present-at-hand' he labelled 'hermeneutic relations' and these operate in the case of devices which must be read off and interpreted, like thermometers and other measuring devices. The second mode of engagement, he described as 'embodiment relations', which involves the category of tools and equipment, and as I am suggesting even buildings. From these examples, the two relationships I began with can be seen as opposite sides of the same coin, both are inevitably part of a fuller understanding of the way we engage with our surroundings.

The kind of engagement I'm referring to between buildings and their users, also has another important dimension suggested by the study of tectonics. This again can be illustrated in John Dewey's writing on art, where he develops the notion of 'resistance' as a fundamental characteristic of the interaction between the body and the world. If our encounter with materiality gives us a means to calibrate our capacities and frailties as human beings, then this must be due to the relative resistance of a material to human 'interference' and transformation. Clearly this takes us beyond what Louis Kahn has more recently referred to as just "letting the brick be what it wants to be", for, as Dewey takes such pains to point out, it is only through our challenge to a material's inherent resistance that we can begin to understand our own characteristic capacities. As Dewey writes, in discussing the actions of the "living creature":

"The only way it can become aware of its nature and its goal is by obstacles surmounted and means employed; means which are only means from the very beginning are too much one with an impulse, on a way smoothed and oiled in advance, to permit of consciousness of them. Nor without resistance from surroundings would the self become aware of itself." (Dewey, 1934: 59).

For Dewey, the language of aesthetic experience can provide a means for exploring this awareness, which should also, in a sense, be a part of the richness of our everyday life.

The architect Lars Lerup has also described this mechanism in architecture, in the book *Building the Unfinished*, in his story of the schoolboy carving his name into the surface of a desk. The anonymous mass-produced object suddenly becomes personalised in this act of vandalism, a gesture of appropriation against a degree of resistance inherent in the material. A further, not altogether ironic example can be found in Peter Eisenman's *House VI*, where the owners carried out their own

act of deconstruction on the architect's already deconstructed bed.

Foreground:

On a more everyday level, the student design project referred to in the title of this paper tries to address the double relationship between architecture and the human body. The students were asked to develop some new ideas for an architectural exhibition, beyond the traditional format of photographs and drawings on a gallery wall. Most students took a 'public art' approach, using street installations or event-based activities, but all were asked to select a topic of their own and for the format to be led by their chosen content. One of the most successful of last year's projects looked at the New Art Gallery in Walsall, England, the first major building designed by Caruso St John Architects, a young practice based in London.

The building is remarkable for its material qualities, being very much in the contemporary tectonic tradition, reminiscent of work by Peter Zumthor and Herzog & De Meuron and even Louis Kahn. The students were interested both in its formal and tectonic articulation and also in the way in which the building was perceived by its users - specifically whether there was any inherent connection between these two modes of engagement. The first part of the project involved a study of surfaces within the building, both in terms of their expression of the construction process and also their contribution to the visitor's tactile experience. The board-marked concrete of the interior provides a trace of the casting process, particularly when juxtaposed with timber panelling which uses an identical module and comparable grain pattern. The timber flooring and wall cladding also tell a story of the building's use pattern, as they accumulate the marks of wear from walking, touching and leaning. The leather binding to the staircase handrails, as well as the polished concrete floors, also in their own ways carry the signs of the building's occupation. The students thus found that there were some common themes linking the making of the building with its use, suggesting the same kind of continuity between the building and the world - and between the building and the body - described in the first part of this paper.

To present their findings and to answer the programme requirement for an exhibition, the students produced two pieces of work that tried to highlight this double relationship between body and world. They were initially asked to construct a small object that would stand as a self-contained exhibition in its own right and for this they produced a bench using some of the same materials as used in the building. They chose a bench as a way of engaging people in a more tactile experience of the material, but they also detailed it in such a way as to emphasise its surface qualities as opposed to its substance or mass. For the second part of the project the students were asked to develop a space in which to exhibit their object and in this case they proposed using their chosen building with the bench becoming a gallery seat. The space would be used for a video installation showing a film of themselves constructing the bench, partly inspired by the Robert

Morris sculpture "Box with the Sound of its Own Making" from 1961. The twist here is that most of the footage was reversed, showing the bench being gradually dismantled, thereby implying that a story was being revealed beneath its visible surface. The other reason for the reversal was to make the connection with the process of engagement between the building and its users, which they suggested involved a kind of erosion of its materials through the 'wearing away' of its exposed surfaces. They juxtaposed the scenes of the bench being constructed with close up film of people in contact with the building, highlighting the continual cycle of transformation of materials that was suggested at the start of this paper.

In conclusion, I would suggest two benefits for the 'beginning design student' in this sort of design and build project. The first is the value of building full-size and observing the behaviour of 'real' materials and construction processes. The other is the limitation of the project to the scale of furniture, which I suggest is here overcome by its relationship to the building it was inspired by. In both cases the value of bodily engagement with the piece constructed cannot be overestimated, for as I have tried to establish above, our bodily engagement with the materiality of things may form the very basis of our sense of self-consciousness - as well as our understanding of the nature of the world around us.

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