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# A Sensuous Ethics of Difference

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*This essay outlines how Western culture, and in particular the practice of architecture, has failed to develop a nuanced and ethical approach to alterity. It examines Maurice Merleau-Ponty's conception of the flesh as a process of continual self-interrogation through perceptual acts that intertwine communality and difference, establishing a shared world through interlocution, and explores how the work of Merleau-Ponty and Luce Irigaray augment each other to deepen our understanding of alterity. It then examines architectural design as an intercorporeal and intersubjective act that creatively refigures sedimented spatial and social habits. Using the example of an architectural design studio, it demonstrates how designers can critically confront nuances of alterity through investigating the corporeal and social depths of architecture.*

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Ethical encounter with the other requires a nuanced consideration of both sameness and difference. Merleau-Ponty's conception of the flesh configures the structure of being as continually in touch with itself through a process of differentiation, as the flesh seeks to experience itself through the relational act of perception. The flesh's paradoxical intertwining of sameness and difference constitutes our very humanity as well as our relations with human others and the sensuous world, making it impossible to separate an ethics of sexual or social difference from an ethics of the sensuous. Through perceptually based creative acts such as architectural design, we can bring to light existing frameworks of social injustice as we participate in the flesh's continual self-discovery. Far from being a nostalgic act, as Fredric Jameson charges, designing in the flesh can intertwine an ethics of care based in communality with a sense of wonder at the other's irreducible alterity to open a way toward shared systems of power.

## SEDIMENTED APPROACHES TO ALTERITY

Ethical treatment of the other in modern society is hindered by Cartesianism's positing of a lone masculine human subject, with the feminine subject rendered

voiceless and subsumed into a universal masculine norm, and the material world reduced to the status of manipulable object. This construction of being avoids authentic encounters with alterity by reducing its nuances to the polar extremes of maximal difference (subject vs. object) and maximal sameness (woman as a deficient form of man). By either subsuming alterity into the self-same or banishing it from the relational sphere altogether, Cartesianism ducks the question of difference, and modern political and cultural systems reflect this reduction. The field of architecture, whose values and methods closely track cultural norms, provides a telling example. Charged with designing and overseeing construction of the built environment, architects follow the money, serving the needs of society's powerful.

Many critics have engaged the discipline's co-opted cultural position. Denise Scott Brown offers a critique of the male star system in architecture, which elevates a few "great men" to star status and relegates other architects—including a disproportionate number of women—to the background (Scott Brown 1999). Diane Ghirardo writes about the "atrophied social conscience" of architecture and takes the discipline to task for valuing form, meaning, and aesthetics over social concerns. She calls for more cutting self-criticism to transform architecture from an "ultimately meaningless and consumable artifact" to "a critique of the existing power structure, of the ways power is used, and of the identity of those whose interests power serves" (Ghirardo 1996, 387–88). Ghirardo calls on architects to challenge unjust tax structures, land use, zoning practices, and other political and social inequities and dares the profession to "question the politics of building: who builds what, where, for whom, and at what price" (389–90).

Fredric Jameson indicts architecture for its uncritical service to the large multinational corporations that control political agendas. He points out architecture's dual capabilities to both oppose and replicate societal norms: as an art form it questions and pushes society, but as a business it survives by giving form to the desires of society's most powerful entities. It is clear that change is needed, but Jameson discusses "the difficulty of producing difference out of the same," noting that change produced from within a system is "little more than a fantasy projection of difference, it is the same masquerading itself as difference" (Jameson 1997, 260). Locked into a cultural system, we must question to what degree "even our fantasies of change reflect its internal logic, rather than our genuine discovery of something else, something radically different or other" (265).

Jameson suggests that we can differentiate creative architectural imagination from fantasy by testing whether architectural ideas might "correspond to new modes of life emerging even partially" (Jameson 1997, 260). We can act simultaneously at the pragmatic and existential levels by pushing spatial design to encourage alternative ways of living, which in turn may "demand new kinds of space" (260). Jameson asserts that a society's public and private space

“notoriously underscores and reinforces whatever division of labour is active in the social order” and challenges architects to creatively question established aesthetic principles by thinking in tune with outside disciplines such as literature or film (261). These disciplinary juxtapositions can create unanswerable questions that open us to the transformative possibilities of architecture.

#### ALTERITY IN THE FLESH

In “Dialogue and the Perception of the Other” (1973), Merleau-Ponty details how social interaction with human others and sensuous interaction with material things are variations in a single fleshly fabric, as he discusses our fundamental interdependence with both people and things and the capacity of both to refigure our horizons. Perceiving another human being interacting with the world I sense (in Merleau-Ponty’s example, seeing a man pick up a hat to shield himself from same sun that I feel burning my own skin), I understand that he or she shares my same world, a field the flesh structures as a general relational condition of which my body, the human other, and material things are variations (Merleau-Ponty 1973, 136–37).

This relational field, the flesh, is a milieu of constant, transformative exchange. Sensuous and spatial things and places transform me moment by moment, from small adjustments of pupil size and heart rate to sudden flashes of meaning. Interaction with human others transforms me as well, as they present new possibilities for interpreting and interacting with the world. Merleau-Ponty underscores the flesh’s sensuous-social intertwining as he writes, “The looks with which I scan the world, like a blind man tapping objects with his cane, are seized by someone at the other end and sent back to touch me in turn” (Merleau-Ponty 1973, 134–35).

Merleau-Ponty reconfigures the relationship between the human subject and the material world into a participatory exchange between perceiver and perceived, redrawing the two mutually exclusive Cartesian spheres of mind and matter into the intercorporeal and intersubjective web of the flesh. But difference is not erased; rather, it forms the basis of perception and permeates the intersubjective world of human sociality. Merleau-Ponty’s foundational work figures perception in terms of a *Gestalt* differentiation of figure from ground, and later develops into the ontology of a flesh in a constant process of becoming. Vicki Kirby characterizes the flesh as an endless process of self-interrogation, wherein “the world perceives itself by opening itself to the experience of its own difference” (Kirby 2006, 133). The structure of human existence, stitched onto the fabric of the flesh, manifests the flesh’s underlying structure through interrogative acts of perception. Kirby characterizes perception as “a desiring organ that seizes upon its own alien-ness and, in the wonder of the encounter, is reconceived” (134), and her characterization underscores

Merleau-Ponty's repeated assertion that our own sensuousness is the foundation for our abilities to perceive.

Merleau-Ponty describes the flesh as "indivision of this sensible Being that I am and all the rest that feels itself in me" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 255). The flesh's urge for self-interrogation manifests in our intercorporeal relationships with the sensuous other, in which the perceived thing is vivid and vital, constantly moving and changing in relation to ourselves, presenting itself from new spatial and temporal perspectives, beckoning us and inciting us to construe meaning and accomplish tasks. In sensing, we turn toward and carnally adhere to the sensible world of which we are part through a dehiscence<sup>1</sup> opening to the other that effects a paradoxical doubling in which things exist simultaneously in the world and within our own carnal schemata. To Merleau-Ponty, our perceptions are chiasmic "openings of our flesh which are immediately filled by the universal flesh of the world" (Merleau-Ponty 1964b, 16).

As the flesh entwines alterity and kinship, we eschew the "forlorn subjective self that defines itself as not being the worldly thing" (Dillon 1997, 110) and take our place as a thing among things. Yet alterity remains: while the perceived thing unfolds, points, pivots, reveals, and obscures, the perceiver witnesses, follows, makes connections, and puzzles over ambiguities. In examining how perceived things are both communicative and recalcitrant, Merleau-Ponty acknowledges the opacity and alterity that exist alongside our carnal kinship. Whatever we share the perceptual field with is part of the same Flesh and yet exceeds our grasp. Michael Yeo writes, "This 'something more' escapes or resists assimilation, remains wild with respect to our attempt to capture and encompass it in our horizon. The phenomenon . . . has the capacity to talk back as it were, to surprise us, to explode our horizons, [forming a] paradox of immanence and transcendence" (Yeo 1992, 40).

As an element of the flesh, human alterity is also a form of participatory exchange, one in which we resonate particularly deeply with the flesh's interrogative "opening itself to the experience of its own difference" (Kirby 2006, 133). For in relating to a human other, we experience another style of being radically like our own yet manifestly an equal interlocutor with divergent desires, and every human encounter thus becomes an opportunity for self-understanding alongside the opportunity to understand the other and the very structure of the flesh. Merleau-Ponty writes,

Whenever I try to understand myself the whole fabric of the perceptible world comes too, and with it come the others who are caught in it. Before others are or can be subjected to my conditions of possibility and reconstructed in my images, they must already exist as outlines, deviations, and variants of a single Vision in which I too participate. . . . Certainly I do not live

their life; they are definitively absent from me and I from them. But that distance becomes a strange proximity as soon as one comes back home to the perceptible world. (Merleau-Ponty 1964b, 15)

The divergence between myself and the human other forms the basis of creative transformation of both the world and myself. Interlocution with the other allows me to see the same world differently—a point Merleau-Ponty brings out in his discussion of the simple act of multiple subjects viewing a table. This act of shared perception transforms my understanding of both the other and the world: interacting with the human other, “something visible to me is becoming a viewer,” and our shared perception of the table “sketch[es] out a dis-position of the table, linking its parts together for a new compresence [shared presence]” (Merleau-Ponty 1964b, 15–16). In a similar manner, shared perception and interlocution in more complex perceptual acts allow different voices to come to a shared understanding of complicated social constructs such as justice. The “new compresence” of these social constructs is co-authoritative, taking multiple viewpoints into account to reach consensus that is respectful of difference.

In the flesh’s rich mixture of sameness and difference, the common carnality that engenders sensuous and social interaction is countered by the perceived thing’s opacity to my gaze and the human other’s differing perspective and invitation to dialogue. The other’s speech or action, a different style of being in response to my own perceived world, has the power to surprise, disorient, and transform me. These possibilities for creative and cooperative transformation spring from the flesh’s communality and its ongoing processes of divergence. As Merleau-Ponty envisions it, “Everything rests upon the insurpassable richness, the miraculous multiplication of perceptible being, which gives the same things the power to be things for more than one perceiver, and makes some of the things—human and animal bodies—have not only hidden faces but an ‘other side,’ a perceiving side *whose significance is based upon what is perceptible to me*” (Merleau-Ponty 1964b, 16, his italics).

#### THE FEMININE AND THE SENSUOUS

This nuanced intertwining of alterity and identity avoids both relational extremes, banishment from the relational realm and subsumption into the selfsame. Although Merleau-Ponty did not take up the question of participatory exchange with a differently gendered human other, his phenomenology accommodates such exchanges, with the flesh’s chiasmic urge toward communality balanced by the fruitful dehiscence of opening toward another. Luce Irigaray challenges the implicit masculinity of Merleau-Ponty’s engaged perceiver and views his construction of the flesh as a threat to feminine autonomy

and difference. Where Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology emphasizes our intercorporeity with the sensuous world and our fundamental kinship with it (we are made of the same stuff), Irigaray asserts that for the (politically dominant) masculine human subject to approach woman in this manner denies her voice and power by denying her irreducible alterity. Irigaray's invaluable criticism of patriarchy's commodification of women lays out a vision for transformational exchange between two differently sexed interlocutors.

In Irigaray's "transformational exchange," subjects open themselves to the possibility of change through receptivity to others. This transformative exchange stemming from intersubjective experience replaces the self-contained *cogito* with an interlocutive subject continually redefined through interaction with the human other—for example, in "copulative space" between couples, wherein each participant both receives and offers "rejuvenating transformation with a loving other" in a process of mutual perception (Lorraine 1999, 144), and with a cultural world "that is always impinging on and permeating" the human subject (77–78). The cultural world, however, has forgotten its maternal debt, obscuring that debt with generative activities of its own, and there is always a danger that man will appropriate both woman's alterity and her generative capacity.

Irigaray maintains that all human relationships should be ethically grounded in the irreducible alterity that gender provides, and identifies the ethical breaches that occur when one person subsumes the other into her or his own horizon, assuming that one person can speak for the other without regarding the offset in desires and needs stemming from alterity. Elizabeth Grosz identifies this ethical breach as the ground of Western philosophy, which she maintains has developed on the unacknowledged foundation of the feminine in subsuming all degrees of gender under the selfsame category of *man* (Grosz 1999, 141).

Grosz articulates Irigaray's fundamental questions about an ethics based on alterity. "If each sex is recognized as autonomous," Grosz asks, "what reorganizations of space, time, ontology, transcendence, ethics, are needed to accommodate them? What kinds of encounter are possible?" (Grosz 1991, 176). These encounters must always include an acknowledgment of irreducible alterity, "an acceptance of the externality and indeed priority of the other for the subject" (176). In order to accommodate this irreducible alterity, Irigaray appropriates Descartes's idea of "wonder" (13).<sup>2</sup> When two subjects approach each other in wonder, each experiences the delight an other can give when met with no sense of opposition or instrumentality. Approaching with a sense of wonder renders one unable to possess, consume, or objectify the other; rather, each subject appreciates the value of the insurmountable difference presented by the other. As Grosz puts it, "Only then can each give to and take what the other has to offer," and she contrasts this delight to the "hostility and contempt for women's alterity in a patriarchal culture" (Grosz 1991, 177).

Just as Merleau-Ponty's flesh can expand to accommodate gender difference, Irigaray's voicing of the ethical demands of alterity can expand to take into account the non-human other and the sensuous world. Acknowledging our intercorporeity with the sensuous world allows us to approach it with wonder at its difference from ourselves augmented by a deep appreciation of its similarity. Stephen Ross urges us to cherish "what we cannot and never will understand or experience," to exist in a state in which "we may also speak of awe" (Ross 1995, 154). The sensuous world, drawn back from objectivity into the relational sphere of the flesh, is the ultimate irreducible other, to which we can accord the same autonomy and priority Irigaray urges us to accord the differently sexed other.

Where Merleau-Ponty describes the body as "a set of colors and surfaces inhabited by a touch, a vision" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 135), so too can a human other breach the boundaries of our lone subjectivity through dialogue, and our own bodies can become inhabited by the other's voice of difference. Through transformative dialogue, we partake of a different spatiality and temporality, which exist simultaneously in the other and in our own carnal depths, and these new spatial and temporal perspectives can incite us to action. Our own ideas, desires, and needs give us the means to respond to the different ideas of the other as we become aware of ourselves as a subject among subjects and open ourselves to active, reciprocal engagement with her or his solicitations. Here, a potent intersubjectivity layered on our shared embodiment forms the basis of an ethics of engagement and care.

In the midst of this transformative intersubjectivity, difference continues to configure the field of interaction. In the very act of constructing a shared framework, the opacity and irreducible alterity of the differently sexed other (or, indeed, of any other) causes her or him to "remain wild," continually exceeding our grasp and resisting assimilation into our own horizons, ever calling us into further transformative exchange. And Merleau-Ponty's radical restructuring of subjectivity gives us an ethical base for inclusion of the more-than-human world in our creative decisions. Appropriating Grosz's question (Grosz 1991, 176), we may ask about the things of the world, "What reorganizations of space, time, ontology, transcendence, and ethics are needed to accommodate them? What kinds of encounters are possible?"

#### ARCHITECTURE IN THE FLESH

The pre-personal realm of Merleau-Ponty's flesh lies beneath the Cartesian subject-object divide, grounding our personal subjectivity, our intersubjective relationships with others, and our intercorporeal relation with the sensuous world. The model of the flesh, in which the intertwining of perceiver and perceived is analogous to our two hands touching, proffers a fluxing subjectivity in which the boundary between perceiver and perceived is open and unstable.



This intercorporeity that so artfully entwines kinship and alterity can form the basis of ethical design. Duane Davis describes the relational character of creativity within the Flesh, asserting that “the other leads me toward an utterance” and that “my expression is never mine alone” (Davis 1989, 35). Thus Merleau-Ponty’s perceptual ontology restructures architectural design into an intercorporeal act—an expression of deep carnal kinship in which our engaged sensory experience of the world gives rise to an expressive carnal echo of the experience. “Things have an internal equivalent in me; they arouse in me a carnal formula of their presence,” writes Merleau-Ponty, who then asks, “Why shouldn’t these correspondences in turn give rise to some tracing rendered visible again?” (Merleau-Ponty 1993, 136)

The carnal kinship of the flesh gives a particular character to design, allowing it to be a perceptually driven interrogation “from the very texture of the life-world” (Davis 1989, 32). It engages multi-sensory spatial experience, recognizes the dynamic relationship between body and space, and sensitizes a designer to the sensuous beckoning of the world and to the transformative interdependence between perceiver and perceived. Instead of dealing primarily with intellectual constructs, narrative, historical precedents, or geometric and formal manipulation, operating in what Merleau-Ponty describes as a “rule-governed [and] projective” manner (1993, 133), architectural design can deliberately set out to be receptive to and transformed by the sensuous content and wild being of the larger world, generating form and space from an awareness of our shared corporeity. It can manifest an aggressive materiality and spatiality that confound language and decenters our subjectivity as it beckons us into its carnal depths.

Calling on her own sedimented spatial experience, the architect designs space in relation to the origin point of the body, setting out spatial depth as a charged interval between perceiver and perceived. The resultant space, thick with relationship, beckons both the body and the imagination. In the face of this rich and wordless relationship, the architect fixes on generalities of proportion or moments of materiality and light that cause a space to beckon us forward or bid us to pause. She is captivated by the latent supports of space that go unnoticed by the casual observer and is compelled to express that captivation. The architect’s creative refiguring of spatial experience expresses her astonishment in the face of the world’s phenomenal unfolding and her fascination at her own carnal entwinement with it.

At the Cartesian extremes of absolute difference and no difference at all, architectural and urban design become extensions of the *cogito*, schemes of rationality and artistic genius that manipulate materials in service of universal norms of dwelling. Designing within a worldview that construes the surrounding world as a set of inanimate objects predisposes architectural creations to be self-referential and irresponsible, manifesting an aesthetics of alienation.

A worldview unable to construct systems of shared power manifests architecturally in substandard housing, ghettos, and workplaces with no accommodation of parenting. To adequately engage these injustices, a phenomenological approach to architecture must intertwine both the sensuous and the social aspects of the flesh.

Where Western philosophy has constructed itself on the unacknowledged foundation of woman and feminist philosophy has constructed itself on the unacknowledged foundation of the material world, phenomenological architecture can construct itself on the unacknowledged foundation of sociality and politics. In his examination of architecture's political dimension, Jameson mounts a powerful critique of phenomenologically inspired architecture. Although he characterizes Merleau-Ponty's work as "always significantly committed to a life in space," he sums up Merleau-Ponty's spatial thinking as "the analysis of perception and the Utopian vocation to restore bodily experience to a kind of prelapsarian plenitude" of spatial experience. Jameson calls philosophy and the "aesthetics of perception" natural allies in "a defence of art as what dispels a numbness and a habituation of perception and restores a more vibrant and articulated life in the world" (Jameson 1997, 266).

According to Jameson, architecture conspires with phenomenology to reawaken perceptual capacities dimmed by a lackluster and inhumane modern environment. This nostalgic aim returns architects to the "physical and tactile values" of classical and Renaissance architecture, and leads them to avoid modern and postmodern rationalities and excesses dissonant with the human body. In addition to being nostalgic, Jameson asserts that phenomenological architecture is politically and intellectually dishonest: "This is bad Utopianism in Marx and Engels' early sense; it asks for resurrection without paying the price; change without politics," and is intended only for the rich, to be built and supported on the backs of others (Jameson 1997, 267).

Much of Jameson's criticism is well founded. Because the practice of architecture by its nature engages architects in working out the material details of their spatial creations, it is deeply satisfying to have one's work take up material qualities thematically. Working in the realm of materials and sensuousness allows an architect to work *architecturally*, in the full body of her medium, in much the same manner as we speak of returning filmic qualities to cinema, and Jameson's suggestion of challenging a creative field by bringing in the perspective of outside disciplines should not be followed to the degree that it separates the field from full consideration of its own constitutive elements. Spatial thinking is largely non-verbal and thus resonates deeply with the equally non-verbal attention to sensuousness, and this work is often more enticing than is confronting the uncomfortable realities of social injustice.

Jameson is correct in pointing out that the political dimension should form an essential part of the phenomenological practice of architecture, but he badly

misses the point of Merleau-Ponty's work in misconstruing it as a nostalgic return to Arcadia. Merleau-Ponty looks neither forward nor backward for a time or space more plentiful than the present, but understands the flesh as a process of endless creative differentiation that finds richness and depth in the fullness of the present. As Kirby notes, "By recasting the question of subjectivity as 'the flesh,' that is, as the world's becoming itself, Merleau-Ponty is suggesting that there can be no final arrival any more than there can be a single beginning. . . . Rather, the world, *by implication*, would always have been in the process of discovering, exploring, redefining, and reinventing the nature of its humanity" (Kirby 2006, 132, her italics).

The interrogative nature of the flesh, in which it builds self-understanding through encountering alterity, encourages political interaction that welcomes different voices and enables us to construct a political landscape that reflects "the energies, torsions, contrasts, and tensions of [the flesh's] non-coincidence" (Kirby 2006, 133). The flesh's communal nature allows us to perceive the surrounding world alongside the multiple viewpoints of co-perceivers—and to develop negotiated, co-authoritative social and political constructs that accommodate difference. This radical openness joined with acknowledgment of relational excess, far from being nostalgic, offers a means to advance Jameson's project of supporting the individual in the face of an overwhelming tide of global capitalism through critical, contingent, and forward-looking exchanges with alterity. In fact, Jameson's own proposal of expanding architecture's horizons through juxtaposition with other disciplines is an open act of shared perception that can sketch out the sort of co-authoritative "new compresence" of which Merleau-Ponty writes. Merleau-Ponty exceeds Jameson's proposal by offering the critical co-perspective not simply of an outside discipline but of the revolutionary ontology of the flesh.

#### THE FLESH OF ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN

With the sensuous world, our challenge is to recuperate the subject-object divide and recognize a fundamental and transformative intercorporeity that will promote an ethic of care. With a differently sexed (or classed) other, in addition to recognizing the fundamental kinship of our common humanity, our challenge is to hold open a divide within our intersubjectivity, recognizing and entering into transformative exchange with irreducible alterity. Recognizing the paramount quality of the flesh as continual renewal through the differentiating activity of perception, we can understand the fundamental intertwining of these two approaches and work toward a sensuous ethics of difference. The act of architectural design, which by its nature incorporates both attention to human needs and attunement to embodiment, provides a model for an embodied ethics that creatively negotiates the boundaries of sameness and difference.

In “White Logic and the Constancy of Color,” Helen Fielding discusses a set of provocative films by Bruce Nauman that reveals the normally latent framework within which we perceive color in relation to the body. In revealing these hidden levels, Nauman brings the films’ viewers to a new understanding of the enculturation of color perception. Fielding points out how, despite perception’s “inherent conservatism . . . our corporeal ability to move into new situations and to take them up . . . leaves us open to creative sedimentation, to seeing anew” (Fielding 2006, 83).

Our natural perceptual attitude assumes constancy in a perceived thing’s color and shape, and our unself conscious orientation to task depends on it, overriding shifts in the spatial relationship between perceiver and perceived. Representational conventions reinforce this conservatism, suppressing creative transformation of sedimented perceptions.<sup>3</sup> Fielding encourages creative corporeal engagement within established systems of meaning by revealing the hidden societal structures that frame and color our perceptions. Bringing these hidden structures and biases to light allows the body to creatively participate in dismantling them and exposing the contingency of the “neutral and universal” (Fielding 2006, 72, 88). Creative rethinking of aesthetic conventions can extend to creative rethinking of cultural conventions, questioning their fixity and their ability to communicate and accommodate difference.

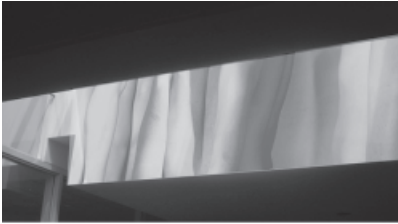
The architect’s spatial creativity challenges perception’s inherent conservatism, in which we suppress “stray data” in order to hold onto the established meaning of a percept (Fielding 2006, 83). Architectural design can reveal the hidden supports of spatial experience (light, color, texture, proportion) and so gives us the opportunity to experience space less habitually and to rethink societal norms of spatial occupation that deal unethically with difference—enabling our ability for creative sedimentation. But to describe the creative process that offers this gift to its viewers and inhabitants, inverting Fielding’s “creative sedimentation” to form a new term, “sedimented creativity,” may better serve our purposes.<sup>4</sup> The creative imagination of the architect draws from sedimented spatial and social experience and imagines how it might be different—not absolutely or even primarily different, but different in small, effective moments layered on conventions of usage—pushing to understand the latent supports of spatial experience and societally sedimented habits of inhabitation. With an understanding of invisible spatial frameworks gained through sustained and reiterative spatial query, the architect makes moves that creatively reconfigure them and that take aspects of spatial and social experience out of the ordinary.

To do this, the architect draws heavily on embodied experience. As a thing among things (intercorporeity), she lets her own carnality infuse the walls and volumes of the emerging space, and sets out walls that possess the same environmental porosity as the human body. As a social participant (intersubjectivity), she

imaginatively moves through a spatial sequence, and imagines what it must feel like to need comfort in a clinical setting as one's body rides the line between subject and medical object, or imagines how it feels to be an "other" physically embedded in the community but socially isolated through lack of employment.

A fourth-year architectural design studio I teach at Mississippi State University illustrates the general principles of intercorporeal and intersubjective design with concrete examples. The studio, designed to explore issues of alterity and intersubjectivity, begins by interweaving reading and making. Texts on modern alienation, camouflage, and the nature of perceiving lived bodies underpins the work as students manipulate photographs of their own bodies and faces to examine the lived body at the threshold of perception, and then develop installations within the studio building that mimic the building's spatial logic. The body is the means to recuperate the thing from the realm of object-other and bring it into the relational sphere of the flesh.

To complete these projects, the designers must see themselves as "a thing among things," exploring the body as a set of colors, textures, masses, and contours among these same sensuous aspects of their surroundings.<sup>5</sup> Mackenzie begins



A B



**A Thing among Things.**  
A...Mackenzie McCulloch,  
body/drapery. B...Jessica  
Bell, body/crape myrtle.  
C...Jaynae Young, body/  
oak tree. D...Cory Low-  
ery, remembered body.

C D

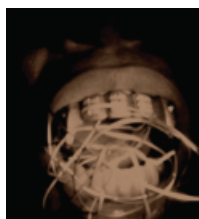




A B



**A Thing among Things.**  
A/B...Chelsea Clark, eye.  
C/D...Jesse O'Quinn, mouth.



C D



by examining the similarity of his upraised arms to the stalks surrounding him in a stand of bamboo and moves to the deeper resonance of his curving body contours amid the soft, hanging folds of a curtain. Jessica climbs into a crape myrtle tree with holes and runs in her stockings to mimic the tree's lines and its spotted texture. Jaynae abandons formal similarity to a large oak and mimics its growth pattern, superimposing multiple photos of herself positioned in and around the tree doing handstands or perching with outspread arms. Cory explores the fading visual memory of an absent body by layering blurred images of his body onto clear acetate sheets, and then layers memory onto the temporal experience of walking through a hallway by installing the acetate images at life size along a row of full-length windows. Chelsea fastens on the human eye as the threshold between inner and outer worlds, first graphically abstracting the eye itself to understand its object qualities and later positioning herself behind the fork of a young tree with her eye in the vertex. Jesse crosses the body's threshold into the cavity of the mouth, coiling wire in and around the void, and later re-presents this transgressed volume in an abstract sculpture of twisted metal conduit

filling and spilling out of a tight residual space within the architecture building.

These architectural inquiries, first showing the lived body at the threshold between subject and object and later merging the spatiality of the body representations with the spatial logic of a host building, evoke Merleau-Ponty's description of the body as "a set of colors and surfaces inhabited by a touch, a vision" (1968, 135). Reviewing the installations, we are struck by the dual nature of the body as both perceiver and perceived, at the way intention, agency, and the bodies' own gazes intertwine with their sensuous qualities to illuminate the full and ambiguous depth of the lived body.

The bodily thingness in the installations continues to operate as the studio progresses to building design, but becomes increasingly underpinned by embodied sociality. In two building design projects meant to integrate low-income inhabitants into the larger community, the studio sets as its central question: "What and how would we design as a community if we were to draw the boundaries between self and other differently?" In pursuit of this question we engage in a process of "sedimented creativity" in which the architecture students reimagine the existing building types of hostel and medical clinic, creatively transforming social boundaries among hostel inhabitants, clinic patients, and the larger community. Each student develops a scheme for drawing the surrounding community into the site to interact with its primary inhabitants, and designs spaces to accommodate the associated activities, responding to Jameson's imperative to encourage new ways of living through spatial design. The architecture teaches the community to accommodate difference by combining a low-income family medical clinic with facilities attractive to the larger community and particularly useful to the economically challenged: daycare, a senior center, a gym, a whole foods café. It bridges a work-for-lodging hostel to the larger community with schemes such as ad hoc microshops for hostel inhabitants to sell goods and services, and a communal garden to grow organic food for an on-site community restaurant.

As the studio designers imagine new, hybrid building types that mix social classes by combining social services with desirable and even upscale amenities, they engage in sedimented creativity that allows inhabitants and visitors to negotiate new boundaries between sameness and difference, rethinking previously drawn conclusions about the other. The other's opacity and wildness remain, but sharing the space in their daily activities encourages a degree of mutual understanding within a shared sensuous and social landscape.

With the move to building design, texts by David Abram (1996) and bell hooks (1999) form complementary supports for the intertwined carnal and social aspects of the design process. Abram's wonder in the face of the sensuous world increases awareness of intercorporeity in the studio, and hooks's commitment to social openness deepens the designers' understanding of

intersubjectivity. In particular, hooks's strategy of keeping one foot in the center to be in a position to effect change and one foot in the margins to remain aware of the need for change provides an apt social model for the emerging building designs.

Exploring the intertwined corporeal and social nature of the lived body, each studio designer links a set of spatial intentions with a social agenda. Spatial conditions such as transparency and layering link with social intentions to provide safety in public circulation spaces and comfort in a clinical setting. It is imperative that the spatial conditions remain central in the designers' intentions, or the emerging designs will lose any potential for intercorporeity and collapse fully into social constructs. As a teacher of design, I am continually surprised at how easily programmatic and social concerns eclipse the "indirect voices" of intercorporeal spatial qualities. When the body is forgotten, as it too often is in the rush to a programmatic solution, the resultant designs are "thin" and overly ideational. The "indirect voices" of corporeity are silenced in the presence of elements we can quickly sum up conceptually, short-circuiting intercorporeal experience in a rush to meaning. It is my job to sediment an awareness of carnality into the students' design process.

Ironically, if a designer rushes to ideation too quickly, architecture loses meaning. As an architect draws on intercorporeity, the emerging architecture's materiality resonates with our bodies' capacities to respond to the rhythms and currents of our complex and ambiguous connections to the larger sensuous and social world, evoking deeper and richer meanings. Glen Mazis, appropriating Shakespeare's description of the human body as "such stuff as dreams are made on," characterizes the enfolded body as navigating rhythms and currents of meaning that flow among things, ourselves, and human others (Mazis 2002, 132). To Mazis, the lived body is neither body nor idea, but "something in between and in motion" (129). As we exist in the fleshly milieu, we are intricately attuned to its signals, and our minds are "caught up in [the body's] flow with the world around it" (129). The architect's intercorporeal and intersubjective design traffics in the "circulating of meaning through the material of things" (129), and the materials and volumes she employs intertwine with the lived body in manifold ways as "a keeping of sense, a working through of deepening significance, an encountering of the past, a pulling tug toward possibilities, a repelling blow of facticity at times,<sup>6</sup> a beckoning to enter deeper into ambiguity, and in sum, a sinewed depth of the world's body which we meet within the palpability of our embodiment" (Mazis 1996, 76–78).

Although Mazis does not take up the experience or design of architecture, his description of space is an apt reminder to architects that "space is not a void between objects understood as mere stuff, but rather the openness anywhere that crackles with vitality, emotion, and meaning" (2002, 125). The architect's body becomes a conduit for these currents as it first experiences space and then



creates it, navigating between matter and idea, intertwining the carnal and communal aspects of the flesh.

#### BACK TO THE WORLD

In mid-process, it is clear that the studio designers, despite their good intentions, are not adequately engaging their buildings' intercorporeal aspects. In the face of their desire to have "completed" building designs for the midterm project reviews, it has proven impossible to sustain the intense, reiterative work necessary for authentic spatial inquiry. At the reviews, every designer pins up a complete set of site and building plans, building sections, and interior and exterior perspective views. Plans locate every space diagrammatically so that we are able to have a conversation about social intentions and spatial flow, but they fail to communicate investigation of intercorporeal qualities. Sections (cuts through the buildings) show interior spaces as empty white rectangles outlined in solid black. Elevations (aperspectival views of the building façades) are rendered in one even tone for light and another for shadow, occupying their sheets with uniform flatness. Beside the raw vitality of the designers' early sketches and models, these drawings are business proposals rather than fleshly encounters.

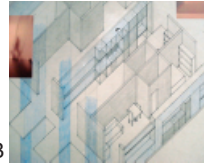
Using Merleau-Ponty's 1948 radio lectures on "the world of perception" as a guide, it is clear that these drawings are exemplars of Cartesian thinking, with their elements arrayed in neutral space (Merleau-Ponty 2004, 50) "in the guise of objects we 'know well'" (93). They are not vivid encounters with the "world of lived experience" (93), but merely "polite company" that offers no resistance to the passing gaze (53). The section cuts should "stand 'bleeding' before us" (93), the mechanisms by which they modulate space ripped open and exposed. Views, in the place of precise perspectival positioning that show space through "the medium of pure intellect," should give us "the feel of a world in which no two objects are seen simultaneously, a world in which regions of space are separated by the time it takes to move our gaze from one to the other" (54). The "uncertain murmur" (Merleau-Ponty 1993, 133) of the elements' immeasurable aspects should exist alongside the precision of their measurable dimensions, visually eclipsing it. Just as Merleau-Ponty criticizes films for not being adequately filmic, for seeking narrative and technique over true cinematic expressions of rhythm, sequence, light, and fluid enframement (Merleau-Ponty 2004, 98–99), these drawings are not architectural.

These inadequate drawings confirm Fielding's assertion about the inherent conservatism of perception when faced with the tension between the comfort of sticking with an established framework and the risk of a determination to see anew. With five weeks until we are done, I can see no alternative to forcibly separating the students from their computers, whose drawing software too easily

offers up measurable and “finished” drawings without adequate depth of thought. For the next three weeks, each designer draws and models by hand on a single 4'×8' sheet of gypsum board, layering graphite, charcoal, plaster, and color pastels.<sup>7</sup> At larger than body size, the scale of the board brings



**Back to the World.** A...Gypsum board studies in progress. B... Meredith Yale, axonometric study of transparency. C... Mackenzie McCulloch, sectional studies of garden light. D...Kali Blakeney, plaster study of wall geometry.



A B



C D



the designers back to the world. Instead of bringing all parts of the design up equally, each identifies a single aspect to explore in depth—and each is charged with understanding the role of a wall in mediating space.<sup>8</sup> Meredith draws eight-foot-long, high-contrast charcoal sections through her site and the surrounding neighborhood to investigate the impact of her mid-rise building, and investigates the phenomenal presence of a translucent wall dividing her hostel's living units. Mackenzie layers charcoal section drawings to work out the proportions of his central garden space so that it gets adequate sunlight, and works out the details of a louver system for his apartment walls. Kali begins to cut into the surface of her board and build out from it in plaster, to understand the geometric intricacies of a faceted exterior wall.

At the term's end, the designs are a qualified success. The students have worked out basic space planning, circulation, and massing, along with articulation of the façades. The innovative programmatic proposals for integrating people of varying income levels are schematically in place, developed sufficiently to support critical dialogue. Most of the designers have made significant decisions about the way their walls enclose space, mediate light, and interact

with the human body, though few yet understand the constructive aspects that support these decisions. In addressing embodied spatial experience through making, the designers have gone to the things themselves to understand the flesh's constant processes of becoming.

#### SHARED CARNALITY AND AN ETHICS OF DIFFERENCE

With his perceptually based ontology, Merleau-Ponty redraws the dualistic boundaries of the modern worldview to “re-establish the roots of the mind in its body and in its world” (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 3), both establishing kinship and encouraging astonishment in the face of its irreducible alterity. Studying and understanding perception itself allows us to recall the carnal basis of ideation, to grasp the “constantly experienced moment” that lies beneath the Cartesian mind–matter split, and thus to gather “nature and culture, [perceiver and perceived] into a single whole” (11). Such a foundation allows a fundamental restructuring of subjectivity and an authentic and original re-evaluation of cultural and philosophical approaches to alterity. As Merleau-Ponty maintains, “To establish this wonder would be metaphysics itself and would at the same time give us the principle of an ethics” (11). Indeed, an architectural attitude in which we remember our shared carnality emphasizes our communality with the perceived world and suggests an ethic of care toward a world in which we see both self and other.

The flesh also engenders an urge toward communality with the human other, engendering non-appropriative intersubjective relationships that build on a shared foundation of embodiment while simultaneously acknowledging the other's capacity to remain opaque, “wild,” and unassimilated to our own horizons. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology configures architectural space as an arena of dynamic interaction that springs up around the moving body and thus reconfigures architectural design as a process primarily drawing from embodied imagination. In the act of design, the architect's creative imagination redraws the boundaries of space and time, elucidating the mutual understanding of a shared landscape while allowing openness—gaps and fissures in both the design and its representations—to accommodate different styles of embodiment. Her creative spatial proposals challenge existing norms of inhabitation and provide a model for uncovering and remaking hidden societal structures that confine our potential for growth and perpetuate unequal systems of power.

#### NOTES

1. Merleau-Ponty appropriates this biological term, which describes a pod splitting apart and bursting open to release its seeds as part of the reproductive process. This powerful image connotes a state of openness within an atmosphere thick with relation-

ship, as the air around and within the pod fills with regenerative seeds that are taken up by the wind to bear fruit in new places.

2. Irigaray appropriates René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, article 53.

3. Fielding points out the “tension in [Merleau-Ponty’s] own work . . . between thinking creatively and adhering to sedimented structures,” manifested when he criticizes abstract art for “multiplying the systems of equivalences [by] severing their adherence to the envelope of things” (Merleau-Ponty 1993, 142 in Fielding 2006, 86).

4. To me, “creative sedimentation” emphasizes the accrual of new meaning by those who experience the creative artifact (although it can also refer to the artist’s “seeing anew” in order to create), whereas “sedimented creativity” speaks more of the architect drawing imaginatively from lived experience to craft creative responses that challenge sedimentation.

5. See the online version of this essay for the second image rendered in color. Students also drew inspiration from, among other sources, photographic images by Francesca Woodman that evocatively explore the dual nature of the body as both subject and object.

6. These meanings accrue to both the architect and the subsequent inhabitant of the design. In particular, the architect experiences the “repelling blow of facticity” all too often, as when faced with the responsibility of supporting the structural load and keeping the rain out.

7. See the online version of this essay for this image rendered in color.

8. Concerning the importance of the wall, the architect’s imaginative presence within an emerging space jumps from one scale to another. At times, she imaginatively roams the whole building and the exterior space around it to gain understanding of the spatial flow. During this work, the imaginative body is typically more attuned to volumes and masses in the design, though it takes light, shadows, colors, and textures into account in a schematic sense. But to fully address the intercorporeal aspects of the design, the architect creates at the scale of a single wall. It is hard to imagine Cartesian matter dumber than a simple wall, and it is here that the profound differences in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology are perhaps most evident in architectural design. The wall is easy to dispense of ideationally, easy to caricature into a single line drawn in plan to signal spatial division. Yet a world exists within it. (An exact parallel exists in intersubjective relationships: it is all too easy to sum up a human being of a different gender, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or geographic region without risking real encounter.) Recuperating the wall into the relational sphere, the architect takes it up as a spatial interlocutor. Her body image merges with the imagined presence of the wall as she considers the possibilities of its inner recesses. David Abram’s description of the environmental porosity of the lived body is literally true of the body of the wall, which must breathe, let in and expel moisture, and soak up and then radiate heat.

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