

## Wrapping the Architectural Body

BARBARA AMBACH  
University of Colorado

*"...The objective gaze is only an invention, an invention that withdraws the body in the hopes of establishing a conventional image of a body, of how the body should be seen. The body is re-marked. ... It is a gaze that turns the body into a machine, into mechanical parts, reducing the body to machine, to architecture, (ex) posing the body as architecture."*

'Changing Out of a Dress' from Negotiations Towards a Self, Jean-Jacques Lequeu - 1770-1830



Fig 1. *Black Veil Satin Stole* by Susan Fenton, 2002

When something is wrapped in something else, there is an intimate reciprocity. The thing 'wrapped' informs the ability of the 'wrapper' to conform, adhere and contain. Simultaneously, the 'wrapper' hinders, manipulates and binds that which is 'wrapped'. The identity of each is manifest in the other as the two forces evolve a new and androgynous identity. When bodies and buildings are 'wrapped' the condition of androgyny appears as a result of the tension and subtle legibility of transfiguration. This androgynous identity is the basis for the discussion and making of architectural installations.

The advent of the architectural installation as an accepted practice has enabled students, environmental artists and architects to imbed a visual, textual and technological complexity into relatively small and unconventional sites. They allow a freedom to explore, unencumbered by the specificity of functions and codes that typically accompany a full-scale architectural program. The architectural installation offers a new frame of reference where architecture, graphic arts and social commentary populate an environment by adding layers of meaning and encouraging public participation.

Architectural installations may take many forms and inhabit varying contexts. In this case, the architectural design studio use both the body and the building as armatures for installation. Explorations entitled, **BodyWraps** and **BuildingWraps** are designed to create coincidence and interdependence - a place of mutuality between the place of installment and that installed. Space and enclosure are viewed as both/and vs. either/or. The ensuing conditions between the discreet and the exposed conjure a sense of intrigue and encourage participation and habitation in a commingled and replete junction. The thing displayed and the place for display are conceived as interdependent where the identity of each is reliant upon and interwoven into the other.

### STUDIES IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

The theoretical underpinning of the work extended from the writings of early and pre-modernists including: Semper, Baudelaire, Loos and Wagner and their polemics on fashion and its influence on structure, materiality and

form. More contemporary works were studied for their highly integrated approaches to space, experience and meaning.

Both Semper's opinion that, "The "principle of dressing" architecture represented the structural/symbolic essence of a building; decoration and the "art form" were so intimately bound that to conceive either in isolation was impossible." 1 and Loos' polemic arguing that both fashion and architecture are direct reflections of a societies moral and ethical evolution are well known. In each case, the cultural manifestations of 'wrapping' the human form and their inevitable translations into architecture have related the desire for exposing the *interiority* of personal expression to the *exteriority* of public perception. "Discussing the schism between interior and exterior in Loos, Massimo Cacciari and, more recently, Beatriz Colomina, have proposed that it might be seen in gendered terms: as a male exterior of rationality and discipline, and a female interior of comfort, privacy, and subjectivity." 2

This separation served early Modernists well in their quest for specificity and identity. With Corbusier's free-façade and the ensuing development of the curtain wall, the relationship of the 'skin' and the 'body' became increasingly distinct. However, in more recent works of Jean Nouvel, Diller and Scofidio, Herzog de Meuron and Peter Zumthor the quest to obscure the boundaries between spatial and tectonic perceptions have revealed the 'blurry' conditions of androgyny. Here, the notion of androgyny develops as the recognition of each space is altered by its fluid integration and identification with another.

In a review of Diller & Scofidio's design of the *Blur Building*, DesignBoom sums up the effects of the cloud produced by millions of droplets of water vapor and its continual transformation of one's perception and experience. "The centerpiece pavilion of the Sixth Swiss National Exhibition is a suspended platform shrouded in a perpetual cloud of man - made fog." "Walking down the long ramp, visitors arrive on a large open - air platform at the center of the fog mass where the only sound to be heard is the white noise of pulsing water nozzles. Computers are adjusting the strength of the spray according to the different climactic conditions

of temperature, humidity, wind speed and direction. The fog mass changes from minute to minute. The blur building expands and produces long fog trails in high winds, rolls outward at cooler temperatures, and moves up or down depending on air temperatures." "The focus of Diller & Scofidio is as much about the nature of space as it is about creating spaces. Their architectural practice utilizes design, performance, and electronic media with architectural and cultural theory as accompanying tools to investigate architecture as a field of social relationships and to remind us that architecture is everywhere." 3 The inability to capture a single view of the building that signifies a sense of permanence or to infer its specific identity results in an androgynous effect.

Whether androgyny is an intended strategy or an inevitable outcome, works such as this evoke a range of perceptual qualities - spectacular, lyrical and fleeting. One might describe these works as androgynous in their inability to be categorized within any conventional or historical milieu. They reside in a state of flux, reliant upon an audience of broad perspectives where information and cultural biases may be adapted to or adapted by the architecture itself.

## STUDIO INTENT

In the studio's investigations entitled, **Body-Wraps** and **BuildingWraps**, the body and the building are the sites for installation. They are deemed to have innate characteristics which when "wrapped" embody new and reciprocal interactions. The dual conditions of male/female, public/private, interior/exterior, seduction/comfort, concealed/revealed are sometimes simultaneous conditions and at others distinct. As the relationships between the cultural manifestations of the armature (body or building) and the material sensuality of the wrapper become increasingly intertwined, the potential for an androgynous legibility occurs. This legibility may be read in three specific ways: one, an implied text, read through its formal, tectonic, and material qualities; two, an imbedded text, read in the literal and graphical notations and; three, a potential or inertial text, by which momentum is inflected as mutation and multiplicity occur.



Fig. 2. *Mystic Package* by Claudio Bravo, 1967

Observations of cultural and global issues, material use and re-use, technical languages and performance criteria led to making appropriate and necessary connections to a broader realm of interrelated design strategies. The design studio identified their elemental qualities which contributed to the meaningful interpretation of the 'wrapped' and the 'wrapper' and together their potential to transform, influence and integrate space and meaning. This fundamental pairing has long been evidenced in art, fashion, graphic design and architecture. Smaller scale investigations in the graphic arts and fashion design have been translated with theoretical and technical specificity to larger scale forms in industrial design and architecture. Similarly, this studio developed a series of small-scale investigations pairing the intrinsic and extrinsic values of the "wrapped" body as both site and context and translated its conceptual, material and structural signifiers into large-scale architectural installations. In line with more recent trends in architectural design and pedagogy this design studio was encouraged to integrate the knowledge and technical specificity of other related design fields in an attempt to imbue a significant and relevant language relevant to a cultural and tectonic reciprocity. These questions helped to guide the explorations: What is the specific intention, use and aesthetic appeal of the Wraps? How does the series communicate a newly devised use from a familiar form? How is the material quality transformed, enhanced or reinterpreted? And, What is the interactive relationship between the new form, the body and the building?

## BODYWRAPS

In the first investigation using the body as armature, each student transformed an existing mass-produced, recycled or recyclable material

into a series of BodyWraps. The interplay between the 'wrapped' body and the 'wrapper' described a newly formed interpretation of both. The body and its inherent physical, cultural and/or ephemeral qualities enabled the 'fashioning' of corsets, cloaks, masks and bindings. Three primary body parts became the focus of a number of the projects - the head, the hands and the torso.

The head (or face) wrappers were a result of an interest in one's apparent identity through recognition, expression, intimacy and protection. How does one recognize another person? The face communicates a person's identity with its shape, features and affect. One may perceive a varying degree of intimacy or connection through the expression of the eyes, mouth or other facial features. The head must also be protected and sheltered from the elements. The head and face wrappers made of inner tubes, woven paper and fine mesh screens exaggerated the necessity for close proximity in order to legibly decipher one's identity through subtle and obscured details.

The hand wrappers were a result of an interest in gesticulation, tactility and a manual means of identification. How does one recognize other things? The hands receive and transmit information by identifying the tactile qualities and characteristics of something else. They gesture a response enhancing conversation or giving direction. The hand was wrapped with forms and materials that exaggerated and/or constricted its ability to perceive or transmit information. These wrappers tested variable effects on the hand's ability to communicate and perform these fundamental functions.

The torso wrappers challenged the notions of comfort, constraint, consumption and conformity. How does one communicate sensuality, discretion and/or availability? The torso, its shape and centrality to the structural integrity of the body are captivating. However, cultural and societal biases have prescribed fashions which obscure, hide or veil its movement and form. The torso wrappers were made of materials that both magnified and contradicted these wholly accepted norms. A set of three corsets were woven and sewn representing the corset's inherently contradictory conditions of comfort (household insulation), constraint (soda cans) and consumption (magazine advertisements). Each in its own way challenged

the seductive qualities of the torso and suggested a new and critical reading of its form, structure and materiality.

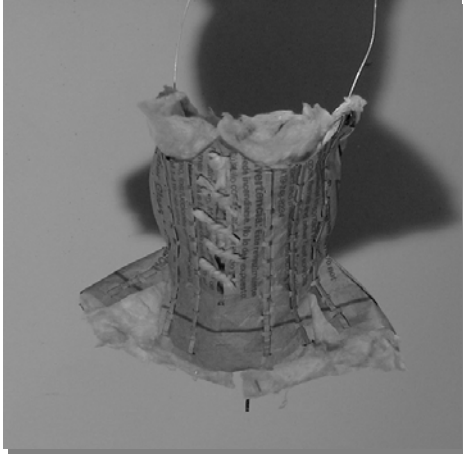


Fig. 3. *BodyWrap Corset* made of household insulation

In another example, newspaper and tissue were meticulously cut into a web of expandable paper veils. Referencing the habitation of the *Burqa*, the veils were layered on the body blurring its original identity and suggesting the cultural values of conformity, obscurity and security. The student further explains that, "The BodyWrap explores the fine line between literal and phenomenal beauty. The choice to use simple (everyday) materials was to allow for the manipulation and ultimately, the transformation from the plain to the desirable. Many Muslim women across the world who wear the *burqa* (a long garment used to drape their body with only a gridded mesh through which to see) or the *hijab* (a scarf that covers their head, forehead, neck and shoulders), believe that it gives them freedom – freedom from the pulls and pressures of the modern world to look beautiful. So, what is beauty? Is it skin deep, it is either hidden away and protected by many layers or exposed for all eyes to see?" 4

## BUILDINGWRAPS

The lessons learned in the BodyWraps exercise were translated into the MatrixCube, an intermediate exercise where descriptive manipulations of structure, materiality and function were formally translated. These provided a thematic language for the third phase of the project, the BuildingWraps. In order to create a

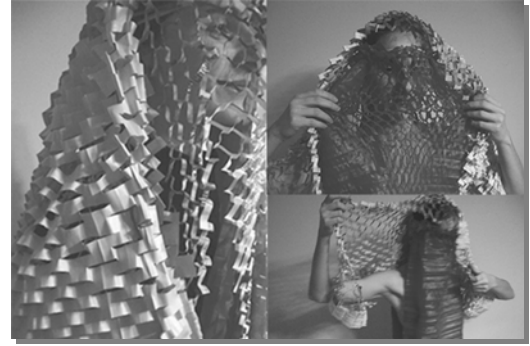


Fig. 4. *BodyWrap Veil* made of cut paper webbing

new and generative image for the College, its existing building was used as the armature for installation. The BuildingWraps were to mark the placement and value of the College as a creative entity in the city, bridging distinct aspects of the campus and initiating participation and exchange with the community and the profession. Some of the BuildingWraps were used to display the works of the students and faculty and announce events, lecture, exhibits, juries and other College activities.

The College's "building" was now seen as "body" and as such, the armature for "wrapping". The woven materiality of the corsets and veils were translated into lathe and paper screens. Each was imbedded with graphics and imagery breathing life into the originally banal and architecturally mute building. The "wrappers" were extended into the interior as a spatial and organizational language. This made for a truly integrated and visually expressive experience.

Extending from the BodyWraps, the corsets were remade into a woven sheathe of wooden lathe and metal. The existing block-like massing of the building was now presented as a more languid and malleable form. The edges of the lathe were imbedded with text and graphics requiring the viewer to amble about the surrounding city blocks in order to read the messages from various vantage points both close and distant. The same language of woven materials and movable structures wrapped the interior of the building such that the distinctions amongst comfort, containment and consumption were inferred.

The BodyWraps describing the nature of the veil were fashioned into screens that function as large-scale signage. Pairs of screens con-

tract and expand revealing the mesh, which at one moment contains and obscures the space in front of the building and at another offers views and invites entry. The nature of the images digitally projected onto strategically located surfaces prescribes a variable perception of threshold, privacy and access. A similar material investigation resulted in the design of expandable studio workstations.

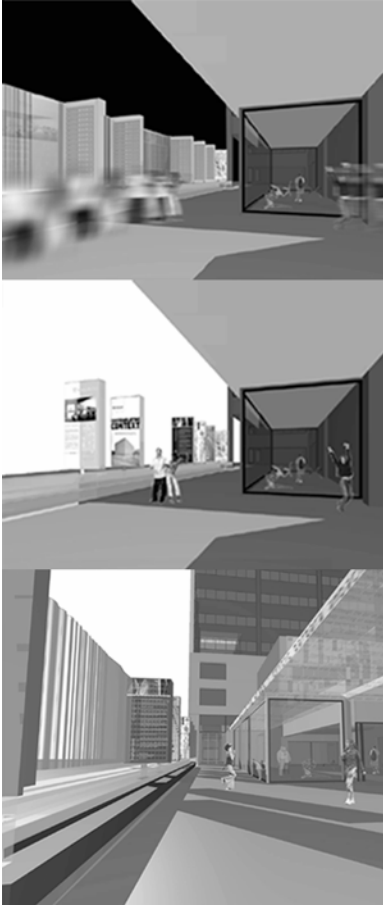


Fig 5. BuildingWrap Veil, expanding signage at entry

## SUMMARY

The designs for an architectural installation in an urban setting revealed the idiosyncratic nature of identity. Questioning the body's modes of recognition and the inherent cultural or functional biases that they represent, the designs avoid conventional categorization, style or the prescribing 'an' identity. The perception of an androgynous 'body' can therefore be perceived. The implications of "wrapping" the body and then the building lead to the development of

innovative material manipulations and techniques. Each attempted to reveal the opportunity for an integral reading of space and meaning while at the same time making a commentary on some of our long held beliefs and assumptions. The design processes asked each student to take pause, reconsider their own assumptions, and ultimately, suggest opportunities for inspiration and a heightened urban experience.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> McLeod, Mary. *Undressing Architecture: Fashion, Gender and Modernity*. *Architecture in Fashion*. Deborah Fausch, Paulette Singley, Rudolphe El-Khoury and Zvi Efrat, eds. Princeton Architectural Press. 1994. p. 48.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 65.

<sup>3</sup> Designboom.com. *Diller & Scofidio: The Blur Building*. Swiss National Expo, Yverdon-les-Bains, Switzerland. 10.20.2002  
<http://www.designboom.com/eng/funcub/dillerscofidio.html>

<sup>4</sup> Catovic, Selma. *BodyWraps*. Design Studio Student. Spring 2005.