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SARAH WILLIAMS GOLDHAGEN ON ARCHITECTURE

Project Runway

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For assessing architectural exhibitions, the following formula typically applies: if the show looks good, then it proffers few insights into architecture. If it appears to be disorderly, indecipherable, or clotted with dense expository wall texts of the sort that critics believe museumgoers dislike, then it may offer insights into the buildings or projects it displays, but most people will not stay long enough to find out.

To see paintings, you need to look at the paintings. That is done standing in front of them. To see buildings, you need to look at buildings. That is done by traveling to those buildings, looking at them, walking around them, and exploring them inside and out. Compared to looking at artworks, looking at buildings is more physically demanding, more time-consuming, and more expensive--a retrospective of Le Corbusier or Renzo Piano, or most any other major architect of the twentieth century, would take you to many cities in many countries on several continents.

Not least for this practical reason, it is far more difficult for non-professionals to accumulate the knowledge about buildings necessary to understand contemporary architecture. Aside from major publicity-attracting developments such as Ground Zero in New York City or Grand Avenue in Los Angeles, there exists a smaller public audience for architecture than for art; less public discourse about architecture than about art; fewer well-placed patrons and advocates for architecture than for art; and a largely ignorant public making what are often ill-informed judgments about architecture. This, even though architecture, more than painting, sculpture, photography, installations, or "new media" art, has a substantially greater impact on our public realm, our communities, our lives.

For this and other reasons, more and more museums are now interested in the phenomenon of the architectural exhibition. Curators, excited by great architecture past and present, endeavor to bring what they can of buildings to people, perhaps with the

hope of eventually getting people to buildings, or conveying to viewers enough about the buildings so that they will seek them or others out and, more broadly, support architecture. But the architectural exhibition, unlike its artistic analogue, displays not the artwork itself but a representation of that work--or, rather, multiple representations of it, all of them partial and pathetically inadequate. As any former architecture client will tell you, one cannot comprehend even a relatively simple building without talking at length to the architect while studying many models, plans, sections, drawings, more drawings, photographs, even mock-ups of details. And even all that pales in comparison with beholding and moving through the building itself. Enabling the museumgoer to decipher the surfeit of visual material sufficient to present even a single building also necessitates words--words describing the building's program; words explaining its site's topographic contours and climatological conditions; words detailing its physical context, whether it be urban, suburban, or exurban; and, for all but the most initiated viewers, words elucidating the architect's particular approach to the particular challenge of this design.

How many non-specialists know how to read a section--or even know what one is? Even if the ordinary museumgoer were able to assimilate, make sense of, and synthesize all this visual and verbal material, few try. This is not the case with an art exhibition. One does not enter a show of paintings expecting to emerge purblind. So how to exhibit architecture in a gallery or museum setting? Oh, have people tried. I once saw an exhibition of the work of a young architect who, in what I suppose was an effort to exaggerate the artificiality of task, fabricated small-scale models of interior views of his various projects and encased them in unadorned plywood boxes poked with a single pinhole. The boxes were suspended from gallery walls near waist level, so that entering the show felt like stumbling upon some amateurish parody of sculptures by Donald Judd. In order to see the actual work on display, you needed to crouch into body-unfriendly positions to peer inside each box.

Another attempt, more successful, dates from 1998, when New York's Museum of Modern Art teamed up with San Francisco's Museum of Modern Art to commission installations from then emerging, now well-established firms such as Office dA and Kennedy & Violich of Boston, Smith-Miller + Hawkinson of New York, and Patkau Architects of Vancouver. The two-venue exhibition displayed innovative, large-scale installations that conveyed a slice of each firm's material and intellectual explorations without misleading museum visitors into the impression that what they beheld was actually architecture. But far more common are the less expensive, less imaginative, and less successful approaches: blown-up magazine-quality photographs of a building and its details; non-contextual computer-generated renderings or computer-animated "fly-throughs"; models offering viewers a bird's-eye perspective of the project that a viewer would likely never see standing on the ground.

"Skin + Bones: Parallel Practices in Fashion and Architecture," organized by Brooke Hodge of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles (MoCA) and installed, very tastefully, by the New York firm Tsao & McKown, skirts all these problems. The show



Elena Manfredini, *Petal Dress*
from *Clad Cuts Collection*,
Spring/Summer 2005

finesses architecture's intrinsic recalcitrance in the gallery setting by making no pretense of offering an understanding of any individual project or building. Instead, the exhibition isolates a number of specific formal practices that are used, or so it is proposed, by both contemporary architects and fashion designers. This is architecture as haute couture. (The clothes look like couture even when they are "ready-to-wear.") At MoCA, architecture's and fashion's "parallel practices" purportedly include exploring the relationship of structure (bones) to envelope (skin); the bending, folding, wrapping, and pleating of surfaces; the deployment of geometries--conventional, distorted, or both-- to create forms; the transformation of usually hidden constructive elements into major features of the design; and the use of new products and materials and of new fabrication processes, many of which have been facilitated by recent digital technologies.

"Skin + Bones" is a lovely show. A looping sequence of galleries display spotlit, depressingly small-waisted mannequins draped in ridiculously beautiful and sometimes amusing clothing. One fashion "piece," by Viktor & Rolf, displays a group of mannequins evenly spaced along the perimeter of a circular pedestal, faceless faces outward. The first mannequin you see upon entering the room is clad in burlap-quality sackcloth. The others are successively dressed in bejeweled and ornate robes until the last, bulkily wrapped mannequin, next to the first, displays a lavishly designed, tightly woven sackcloth gown adorned with a single sackcloth rose. Another piece, by Hussein Chalayan, begins as a circular coffee table. A video clip projected on the wall behind the table shows a runway model stepping into its center, stooping down to latch it to her top, and rising as the table's rings fall in concentrically expanding hoops. Presto! A stepped conical pyramid of a skirt.

Intuiting the complex intellectual demands placed upon the viewer when exhibiting a building, the installers wisely back-loaded "Skin + Bones" with the architecture. One enjoys several rooms of *Vogue*-ish settings before being called upon to think about buildings. As for the architecture, documentation is sparse. A few large-scale photographs, perhaps a model (not the leggy emaciated kind), in rare instances a plan. But the information adequate for the viewer to understand any single building is nowhere to be found. Paired with the clothes, the architectural projects flashed here advance a provocative and convincing case that in both avant-garde fashion and architecture, "parallel practices" abound. One sees a blobby skirt (Junya Wantanabe) and a blobby wall (Greg Lynn). A pleated jacket (Issey Miyake) and a pleated steel and glass façade (Winka Dubbeldam). A contortedly geometric evening gown (Yeohlee Teng) and an intricately twisted museum lightwell composed from distorted geometries (Preston Scott Cohen). A boldly patterned print evening coat (Dries van Noten) and a boldly patterned rooftop (Enric Miralles Benedetta Tagliabue). A dress (J. Meejin Yoon) and a house (Foreign Office Architects) both based on the complex geometric figure of the Möbius strip.

"Skin + Bones" makes a certain kind of surface sense. Critics have correctly taken issue with Hodge's decision to highlight the Museum of Modern Art's "Deconstructivist

Architecture" exhibition of 1988, because much of the architecture exhibited in the "Construction/ Deconstruction" section looks utterly unlike the clothing with which it is coupled. That is but a quibble. The show leaves you wanting to see more. One wants to crumple up paper just like Frank Gehry does, to loop pink and gold-lamé ribbons into fabric just like Ralph Rucci does. One wants to shop. For the purpose of visual and sensory titillation and skin-deep intellectual inquiry, Hodge's unlikely pairing of architecture and fashion is candy for the eyes.

But candy offers little sustenance. When it comes to the merits of the show's premises, the quality of the work it exhibits, and the exhibition's likely impact on the public and the profession (or, in this case, professions), "Skin + Bones" is muddleheaded and disheartening. What exactly is being suggested here? That contemporary fashion designers take inspiration from architects? That contemporary architects take inspiration from fashion designers? That some sort of zeitgeist is driving both professions to "parallel practices"? The show's thinking is cloudy, and the otherwise earnest essays in the catalogue do not disperse the fog. Viewers are left to discern the show's meanings on their own.

The first possibility--that contemporary fashion designers are taking cues from architects--is certainly plausible and, according to Hodge, in some instances verifiably the case. Dresses from Narciso Rodriguez's 2005-2006 collection, in which a garment's structuring elements (zippers, pleats, and seams) are meticulously brandished, are paired with Frank Gehry's famous renovations to his own house, now thirty years old, in which a polygonal glass volume with exposed wood joists crashes into the kitchen of a perfectly ordinary Santa Monica colonial. But if Rodriguez and other contemporary fashion designers are learning from architects, why should we care? Yves Saint Laurent's "Mondrian" dress of 1965 is only the most famous example of how fashion designers, always under pressure to come up with the next new thing, forage opportunistically through the talismans of culture and society. And since the next new thing will quickly be supplanted by the *next* next new thing, it doesn't really matter whether any single idea or collection captures the essence of anything.

The second possibility--that architects are drawing inspiration from contemporary fashion, and are indeed deeply immersed in the world of fashion design--is also correct. This goes far beyond Jacques Herzog's recent line of "shit-smelling" perfume, or Toshiko Mori's nomination to *The Boston Globe's* "Stylish 25" list; it includes the growing enmeshment of architects with fashion designers, as the latter have taken to employing brand-name architects to design their signature buildings, as in John Pawson's Calvin Klein store on Madison Avenue; Rem Koolhaas's and Herzog and de Meuron's Prada "epicenters," respectively in New York and Tokyo; and Toyo Ito's building for Tod's, also in Tokyo. Accessorizing to this trend is a strain of contemporary architecture that is smitten, often fatally, with chic.



Herzog & de Meuron, De Young
Museum, 1999–2005

All the fashion projects mentioned here look to be wonderful, owing perhaps to lavish budgets and visually inclined patrons. (I haven't seen the buildings in Tokyo.) So bedding fashion down with architecture reaps some artistic fruit. But not without incurring a serious cost. The likely impact of "Skin + Bones" on architectural practice is that it will nurture the ever more densely populated cadre of architects who believe, in the words of Caroline Bos of the trendy UN Studio, that "the architect is going to be the fashion designer of the future ... speculating, anticipating, holding a mirror to the world." These practitioners believe that because they, and only they, understand the next best thing, they and their architecture, like these fashion designers and their clothes, are some sort of avant-garde, ahead of the curve, ineffably cool. They insist, preferably with fireworks on the screen behind them, that they and only they discern the social and cultural conditions of the contemporary world; and so they, and only they, make the architecture that suits that world.

The ever more media-savvy architectural *fashionistas*, only some of whom are represented here, are pernicious for several reasons. Most obvious is that fashion is, well, just fashion. Its transience invites playfulness and irony. But buildings, unlike dresses, last for generations. After fifty years, when much moment-specific cultural knowledge will have evaporated, who will get those inside jokes? A building cannot be stored away in the cedar closet like some Comme des Garçons dress. It needs to mean something, and to accommodate not only its clients but their children's grandchildren. And so even if much high-end architecture is enslaved to fashion, that coupling is nothing to celebrate.

More disturbingly, "Skin + Bones" rewards those architects who focus overwhelmingly, sometimes even exclusively, on form. Thought-provoking buildings of aesthetic density are what all clients should seek. Architecture, however, does not just function as a mirror to society, it also shapes that society. An exclusively formalist approach fails to ask some of architecture's most important questions. What kind of social role can and should an institution play in the life of a place? How might a building shape its users' movements through and experience of its spaces and its views, inside and out? What about sustainability? What about site conditions? How will the building or project work with the rest of the city? For the formalist, such considerations are either beyond the province of contemporary practice or they are simply boring. Torquing or colliding geometries is much less bothersome, and much more fun.

And if "Skin + Bones" proposes that both professions are drawing inspiration from some sort of cultural zeitgeist, then the themes conceptualized to organize the show--Identity, Shelter, Geometry, Creative Process, Structural Skin, Constructing Volume, Construction/Deconstruction, Tectonic Strategies, Effect and Ephemerality--are too vague and too heterogeneous to indicate what this spirit of the age might be, or even whether there is one. Martin Margiela's "deconstructionist" cutting and stitching together of fabrics of various textures and patterns into single dresses in the 1990s might be profitably compared to some of the projects in MoMA's "Deconstructivist Architecture" exhibition in 1988; perhaps both do indicate a cultural preoccupation with disjuncture and

irresolvable contradictions. Yet other such pairings fail to suggest a zeitgeist from which these disparate disciplinary practices draw. Haven't both fashion designers and architects always been interested in pattern, and in geometry? (Just look at the façade of St. Peter's in Rome.) Aren't there dozens of examples of modern architects creating structural skins, Minoru Yamasaki's World Trade Center towers being the most famous example? And what about "Constructing Volume"? Isn't that what any architect by definition does?

"Skin + Bones" too often conflates the good with the bad and the ill-advised. Flashes of superb buildings, which beautifully integrate structure, form, program, and materials, such as Toyo Ito's Tod's and Sendai Mediatheque in Tokyo and Rem Koolhaas's Seattle Public Library, are side by side with projects that are just plain silly or bad. Zaha Hadid's widely celebrated Vitra Fire Station, in Weil-am-Rhein, Germany, proved so useless for its intended function that the client, in an act of desperation, transformed it into an arm of the Vitra Design Museum. The fire station's interiors now look more like those dusty "study collections" museum curators pack into disused corridors. (Coincidentally, the day I visited, no one was inside and a fashion shoot was in process with the building as a backdrop.) Diller Scofidio + Renfro's recently opened Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston looks fantastic from the Boston harbor and from the computer-generated stills of it exhibited in "Skin + Bones." Given how conservative the architectural community is in Boston, it is an important accomplishment. Yet the actual building's entry sequence, the non-existent relationship of its structural theatrics to the shape of its interior spaces, its detailing, its spatial processions, and even its top-lit galleries are simply, grievously, awful. Making a dress out of the geometrically complex Möbius strip is fun (J. Meejin Yoon); designing a house out of one (Foreign Office Architects; UN studio also built one) is stupid.

Inside the sprawling, glittering disaster that is "Skin + Bones" is an important exhibition waiting to be curated. That exhibition would explicitly investigate what "Skin + Bones" does only implicitly: namely, that in the past two decades contemporary architectural practices have been greatly changed by the advent of a new generation of synthetic and recycled materials, by new products such as light-emitting diodes (LED) and fiber optics, and by digital technologies such as computer-aided design (CAD), computer-aided manufacturing (CAM), robotic cutting machines (CNC routers), and computer-controlled three-dimensional modeling. These and other new technologies have inspired designers to focus on how they can manipulate a building's surfaces--skins--in unusual and often extremely complex ways. (They also underlie the current resurgence of interest in prefabricated housing, as practitioners feel their way toward the architectural equivalent of "mass customized" blue jeans.) A great deal of the pleating, folding, bending, curving, and colliding surfaces that render some contemporary architectural practices visually reminiscent of clothing design relies on the advent of these new technologies.

The fascination among some contemporary architects with surface (less frequently, and more interestingly, with structural surface) and the new technologies that are driving that fascination are certainly worth a museum's attention. Such an exhibition would

demonstrate these technologies to the uninitiated and would explore how architects are using and could use them. In an ideal world, such an exhibition would conduct this exploration dispassionately, critically. Is CAD simply a better kind of pencil? Will CAD and CAM revolutionize architecture as steel and reinforced concrete once did? Are these and other technologies ushering in a new age of forms, space, or modes of use? Does a new age of forms constitute a new age of architecture? Or are these new materials and new technologies simply new toys, enticing architects to make blobby, folded, or jagged buildings just because they now can? Eventually, such a show may come to a museum or a gallery near you. When it does, will you go to it? And if you do, how long will you stay?

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