

FASHIONING ART CRITIQUE

CONCEPTUAL ARTIST AS A FASHION CRITIC? OR JUST A CURATOR OF HIS OWN DESIGN LEGACY?

HELMUT LANG WHO RETIRED FROM HIS EPONYMOUS LABEL IN 2005 HAS SHREDDED HIS REMAINING 6,000 ARCHIVE GARMENTS TO USE AS RAW MATERIAL FOR MAKING A SERIES OF SCULPTURES. HE ALSO DONATED THOUSANDS OF PIECES TO MUSEUMS WORLDWIDE.

Source: WWD

DIFFERING DISCIPLINES CROSSING PATHS

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Architecture and fashion are apparently polar opposites. They differ in scale, style and approach. It takes more time and effort to build a house than to make a dress. Some say that architecture is serious, planned and considered whilst fashion is frivolous, impulsive and sometimes even reckless. But architecture and fashion also share a lexicon of concepts. *Address* asked two writers working in the field of architecture to consider the relationship between the two disciplines.

ARCHITECTURAL COBBLERS

Writer TOMAS KLASSNIK

The similarities between footwear and architecture may be obscured by their differences in scale, however, both are tied through the need to balance satisfying mankind's utilitarian requirements whilst also acting as vehicles for cultural communication. Architecture's most basic purpose is to provide warmth and shelter from the harsh natural environment, protecting us from wind, rain and cold through layers of brick, concrete or glass technologies. Shoes satisfy this fundamental desire for protection too. Layers of leather, plastic, rubber or textile act as a centimetre of compressed culture, separating our vulnerable fleshy soles from the coarse earth below. Both achieve these practical necessities through an array of styles, forms and construction techniques, communicating ideas, beliefs and aspirations of identity inherent to the societies that create them.

Just as the gel soles, air bubbles and coloured go-faster stripes of trainers celebrate ideas of enhanced performance through exaggerated displays of their technology, so the Hi-Tech architectures of Norman Foster or Richard Rogers's Lloyds building, emphasise the technologies of their construction as part of an aesthetic vocabulary. Conversely a Christian Louboutin stiletto seeks to conceal how it is made, relying on a fetishistic shallow film of curves, flawless continuous surface celebrating the elevation of man (or more often woman) from the assault of nature's dirt.

¹ A tall hard heel can modify a person's posture, just as the echo of footsteps on a hard marble floor might manipulate the behaviour of those that pass over it.

² Zaha Hadid has worked on a range for Lacoste, her 'Capsule' collection exhibiting her familiar computational dexterity, with dynamic fluid grids spiralling up the wearer's leg, landscapes and topographies conventionally underfoot now absorbed into the description of the shoe itself.

³ United Nude founded by Rem Koolhaas's architect nephew of the same name, have produced a range of architecturally inspired shoes such as the 'Eamz', with what looks like a chair leg reproducing the function of a heel: furniture and foot uncannily combined.

⁴ How few sports stadiums actually possess the visual impact or instantly recognisable iconography of a sport's shoe? Or how many shopping centres provide the warm stretchy comfort of the fluffy Ugg boots that polish their marble-effect flooring?

The social protocols suggested by the immediately recognisable stylistic treatments of building typologies of bank, office and home are equally evoked through the characteristics of lace, sole and heel particular to different types of shoe, whether brogues, loafers or sandals. Each is capable of choreographing our physical and psychological behaviour often through the interface of a particular shoe meeting its corresponding architectural surface¹.

The boundaries between these disciplines have, in recent years, started to blur, with a number of architects such as Zaha Hadid² and Rem Koolhaas³ (the nephew) offering shoe designs as embodiments of their individual formal architectural languages. These shoes attract attention and unsettle through the novel invasion of footwear's aesthetic conventions by alien processes or forms, which are presented as hybrids or small sculptures, as much as shoes. Architects might find comfort injecting their fantasies into these designs, purified architectural models and polemic demonstration of their concepts: vessels of expression, seemingly free from the contamination of context or messy occupation of actual buildings.

Perhaps it would be rewarding to reverse this interdisciplinary dialogue and suggest more of the criteria of shoe design on architecture⁴. Maybe it is time we gave shoe designers a turn to inject public architecture with a dose of the expressive variety, so commonly seen on the shelves of the ordinary high street.



ARCHITECTURAL UPLIFT

Writer LAURA CHAN

The dialogue between the characters Scottie and Midge in Alfred Hitchcock's film *Vertigo* (1958) is an appraisal of the structural revolution of the bra¹. Such representation of the brassiere of the future exceeds today's underwear in its precocious ability to support. Although it is only a fictional device in the plot of a romantic mystery, this bra and its ability to provide the wearer with 'revolutionary uplift' should be considered as a significant blurring between the disciplines of architecture and fashion.

A far cry from the primitive strips of fabric Roman women wore in the third century, this advanced undergarment excels in its structural performance. Working on principles of engineering in the way that a cantilevered bridge operates, the enhanced figuration of the brassiere allows for the removal of fabric and fastenings, permitting breasts to soar free from traditional brassiere structure². In keeping with the modernist doctrine less is more, such contemporary clothing can be likened to the principle of modern architecture – aesthetics based on function.

As our bodies are always the structure on which garments are draped, the bra is a special kind of garment as it is worn at a place where the body is not merely a passive receptor: mass (breasts) and structure (bra) are actively engaged. As movement increases with mass, keeping the buxom chest in place requires a bigger structural force. The more

¹Scottie: What's this doohickey?
Midge: It's a brassiere! You know about those things, you're a big boy now.
Scottie: I've never run across one like that.
Midge: It's brand new. Revolutionary up-lift. No shoulder straps, no back straps, but it does everything a brassiere should do: works on the principle of the cantilevered bridge.
Scottie: It does?
Midge: An aircraft engineer down the peninsula designed it! He worked it out in his spare time!

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IJburg Bridge designed by Sir Nicholas Grimshaw

Situated East of Amsterdam, IJburg is an archipelago of seven artificial islands, which have been raised from the IJ-lake as part of a residential development project. Completed in 2001 the main bridge is 250 metres long and links the first of the islands to the mainland. The bridge is locally known as the 'Bra Bridge'.

robust chest may need the support of straps to limit fluctuation, just as the wobbly Millennium Bridge required additional dampers.

The disciplines can blur as both are based on structure, shape and 'aestheticising' basic necessities. They are temptresses, skilled in the art of seduction. (Hi-tech houses go beyond sheltering just as Wonderbras are not simply about support.) Like architecture, fashion encloses yet displays the human body in its physical, cultural and psychological facets: the fully clad Victorian woman in chemise, drawers, corset and petticoat represents the favoured style of the period compared to today's ubiquitous push-up bra and pants. When architecture adopts the transient nature of dressing and undressing and fashion pushes the boundaries of structure and materiality, a greater freedom exists in creating visually exciting design. These colliding disciplines mean drapes of fabric can act as walls and women can wear 'bridges'.

But what happens when the bra comes off? Is the illusion broken? The perfect image shattered as the structure collapses and everything is left to sag? Evoking the sensuous imagery of body as landscape and breasts as large as the Golden Gate Bridge, this masterful cantilevered undergarment is ideal design in terms of satisfying the full brief. (Pun intended.) And given the chance to wear a Wonderbra or a bridge, I'd pick the bridge every time.

