

TECTONICS AFTER VIRTUALITY: RE-TURNING TO THE BODY

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INTRODUCTION

Since its origin, architecture has been the art of organizing physical reality, the act of establishing the material order of a cultural order. Until recently this has meant to work in and with tectonics. However, as our civilization moves deeper into the information age, cultural expressions (sources, processes and products) become increasingly dematerialized, virtualized. In a culture of the simulacrum,¹ the corporeal loses ground to the informational, the concrete to the representational, the real to the simulational. The new civilization presents us with a great challenge to the corporeal aspects of our humanity and transitively to architecture.

Our jobs, entertainments, and relationships increasingly demand less and less from our bodies. Neither muscle nor even presence is truly important in more and more tasks. From ATM machines to television to telecommuting to the internet, contemporary life depends on the absence of the body or, better said, in substituting its presence by means of information (i.e., non-material) technology.

Late 20th-century consumer society that supposedly celebrates materialism and fully satisfies the body, actually devalues materiality and the corporeal as even its most desirable goods become evanescent items whose values begin to disappear immediately after purchase (as they are used up, worn out, or fall out of fashion). Consumer society only values the source, the act and/or the reason for acquiring (or enticing to acquire). Not surprising, consumerism has necessarily evolved into a media culture whose purpose is the continuous (re)creation of needs that are obtained via information and satisfied through further consumption. The resulting information age only accelerates the displacement of the material, the real, and the body.

Contemporary civilization gives little room for interpretation in this matter. In today's world, manufacturing has lost its importance to service and information. Construction cannot compete against the speculative stock market and the ephemeral MTV. Craft, assembly, stability, attachment, presence, and detail continue to recede as image, juxtaposition, fluidity, detachment, surface/interface, and impression take over. All this indicates that the architectural act is moving from materialization to visualization. The language of texture is being taken over by the language of images.

And yet, as we detach ourselves more and more from the materiality of life during our waking time, the more we are attracted to it. For instance, the glorification of the body, the huge popular draw of sports (albeit mediatized), the fashionable physical fitness and healthy lifestyles, the mystification and mythification of physical beauty, youth and sex, and the use of

legal or illegal drugs to enhance the sensorial experience of bodily existence indicate the presence of some social/personal mechanism of compensation.

Quite simply, we cannot shut down what we are: incarnated, corporeal beings. Thus we find ourselves in the midst of a struggle: the ancient, primordial calls of the body and its instincts (the unconscious) collide with the cultural demands of detached rationality, immaterial action, digital production, and mindless consumption. Tectonics "smashes" into the ethereal.

In architecture, this issue increasingly dominates contemporary reflections.² Is it possible, for instance, to honestly maintain a material and traditional understanding of architecture in a world increasingly dominated by disembodied virtuality? When the visual appearance of something is more important than its actuality, when the seeming is more important than the real thing, is there room for tectonics?

Instead of attempting to answer these questions, we have chosen to present arguments and examples describing what we see as different directions at work in the struggle of contemporary architecture to deal with the forces of virtuality and tectonics. Implicit in this position, so beautifully expressed in Kurosawa's film *Roshomon*, is that "there is no single truth, no single explanation; even observation itself is open to scrutiny."³ This inclusive and pluralist viewpoint implies a rejection of dualism and its forced constructions and choices. We will briefly elaborate on this point before proceeding with the architectural discussion.

DUALISM

The nature of our language, logic, and the very way of building an argument make it almost impossible to avoid dualism. This is a frustrating problem borne on the intrinsic nature of rational modes of inquiry.⁴ The best (and perhaps only) thing one can do is to recognize that "categories may serve as tools for inquiry, but they should not be thought to pre-exist inquiry."⁵

Inevitably trapped in the prison of discursive language/thought, we are to use its binary constructions to establish a conceptual terrain upon which we can engage in a reflection that moves back and forth between these structures. This approach, however, neither defines the problematic as dualist nor does it attempt to resolve the tension in some final synthesis.

Kisho Kurokawa's interpretation of symbiosis appears very useful here.⁶ According to Kurokawa symbiosis implies a relationship of mutual need between different parties in which there still could be competition, opposition, and struggle as long

as there are common elements and values that keep the interaction going. He adds that “the concept of symbiosis is basically a dynamic pluralism. It does not seek to reconcile binomial opposites through dialectics...”⁷ but instead implies situations and products that are ambiguous, vague, chance-driven and plagued with multivalences and contradictions.

We are thus to examine the seemingly opposing sides of virtuality and tectonics with an understanding that they imply and need one another and may act as potential parents of multiple parallel, coexisting, and at times conflicting offsprings. Accepting this dynamic relationship between language based categories will shed a post-dualist light on the subject under scrutiny.

TRANSCIENCE ARCHITECTURE: A CALL TO EXPRESS THE ZEITGEIST

The outcome of today’s culture of simulacrum is a society unreflexively surrendered to the fluid unfolding of momentary activities and spectacles. We live filling ourselves with fleeting exterior inputs only to find that we need more and more “stuff” to satisfy an insatiable appetite to consume. Rushing from need to consumption, fashion to fashion, channel to channel we are in a continuous state of *transience*,⁸ our minds and bodies dwelling nowhere. In this “outside-in” rather than “inside-out” life we aim at receiving, absorbing and having instead of externalizing and being.

This cultural situation has not yet been fully expressed architecturally. The great majority of our built environment continues to be designed and made following an ideological agenda that precedes and thus does not acknowledge the contemporary world. From this standpoint, there is the need, indeed the duty of architecture to express today’s zeitgeist. This position would support the projection and construction of buildings that bring the qualities of a media culture into the quite actual realm of the built. This “creative” exportation of the logic, nature, and appearance of the virtual into physical reality would make people experience the hidden but quite concrete effects of virtuality in actuality. The purpose of such an architecture would not be just aesthetic but more importantly critical. Architecture would put in sight that which is out of sight by expressing the transience of our world of simulacra. But how? As Tschumi asks:

How can architecture, whose historical role was to generate the appearance of stable images (monuments, order, etc.) deal with today’s culture of the disappearance of unstable images (twenty-four-images-per-second cinema, video and computer-generated images)?⁹

The screen is perhaps the best metaphor to think about today’s zeitgeist as we are daily confronted with its surfaces of appearances—as both sensorial receptors as well as prostheses (extensors) of our own bodies.¹⁰ The power of the screen concept to guide contemporary architectural work is evidenced in many of the recent works presented at the MOMA “Light Construction” exhibit.¹¹ The notion of screen is a recurrent theme that appears reinterpreted in the buildings’ skins (and walls) as ambiguous statements of tangible, tectonic elements that oscillate between inside and outside. Works such as Nouvel’s Cartier Foundation consciously play with the dissolution of solid materials into transparencies, translucencies, and opacities that sug-

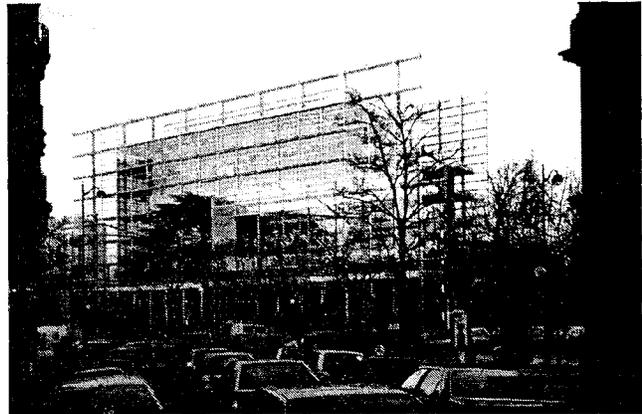


Figure 1: Jean Nouvel: Cartier Foundation for Contemporary Art, Paris³

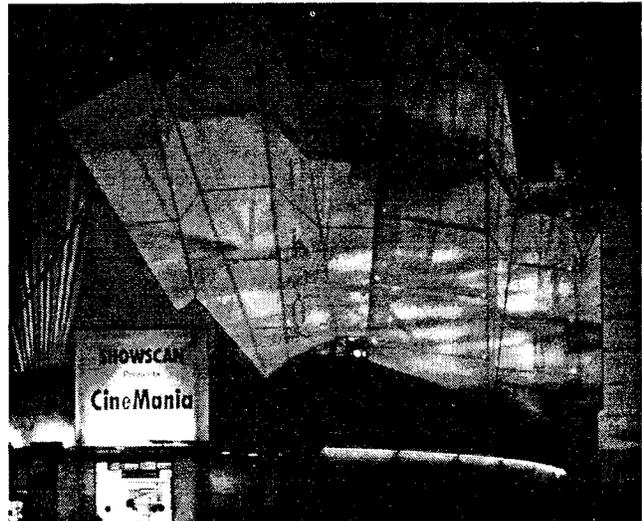


Figure 2: Mehrdad Yazdani: CineMania Theatre, Los Angeles⁴

gest a fleeting vision of a disembodied presence. They remind us of Marx’s succinct observation on his own modernist cultural condition: “all that is solid melts into air.”¹² In a different but related venue, Herzog & de Meuron’s Signal Box auf dem Wolf partially reveals the visceral (the concealed internal organs of the human body) in a persuasive attempt at subverting our understanding of boundaries. These kinds of architectural responses suggest that we need to acknowledge today’s transience as a reflection of the instabilities and dematerializations that are rapidly taking place in our society—from technology to institutions to architecture itself.

The metaphor of screen is carried further when the wall becomes a transmitter of electronic (or other) information systems and therefore adopts a state of continuous metamorphosis. This challenges our sense of space and subverts the place-making functions that architecture has historically provided. A true architecture of screens transcends its own physicality by offering buildings of a multi-dimensional character. Space and form are forgotten for the sake of what appears on the surface. Hence, the traditional fixed “whereness” of architecture is *transfixed* to changing virtual localities. This does not come at a great price though. After all, living in a culture of the simulacrum means to leave substance and depth behind for the sake of appearance and surface.¹⁵ Mehrdad Yazdani’s L.A. CineMania Theater and Coop Himmelblau’s UFA Cinema suggest possible

architectural iterations.

Ultimately, the logical locus of transience architecture resides neither inside nor outside the building, not at the skin's surface, not even on the computer screen. Rather, it exists within a series of *virtual territories* removed from tectonics, materiality, the body. The ultimate transience architecture must migrate from reality to cyberspace. This radical act requires a complete redefinition of architecture¹⁶ that totally challenges and affects our own sense of being.

Transience architecture, whether in its mild or more radical incarnations, defies our ontology and in doing so fosters critical reflection. Hence, from some quarters, there is a call for resistance, the need for what may be termed "presence" architecture.¹⁷

PRESENCE ARCHITECTURE: A CALL TO RESIST VIRTUALITY

After spending 10 hour days in the fluid, disembodied, superficial, sense-deprived and largely non-public digital environments of virtuality, the last thing that someone may want to experience is a real world with the same attributes of the environment they have just left behind! Instead, and seeking to compensate for what could be seen as today's intolerable and unhealthy transience, many people would like to find themselves in a highly material, sense-rich and public environment that assures them of their reality, wholeness, and presence. Susan Yelavich refers to this in the *Edge of the Millennium*:

*...the dematerialization...as a consequence of electronic digital technologies...support(s) the idea that our external reality is no longer entirely legible. Perhaps that is why we are more concerned with the fusion of internal and external realities. Increasingly there is a call for the recognition of the presentness of history, and by extension, for the presentness of the spiritual dimension of existence.*¹⁸

The importance of the *present*¹⁹ to break the incantation of the virtual and thus bring us back to reality is consistent with the strong tectonic presence and nature of architecture. We are talking of an architecture that provides us with the needed weight to keep us grounded amidst the lightness of today's superficial fleetingness and simulation.²⁰ Presence architecture grounds by celebrating not the momentary but instead the present moment, not by accelerating our lives but instead by slowing them down and thus providing calm, repose.²¹ Presence architecture arouses the emotional and spiritual being of the visitor by calling attention to its own tectonic presence.

Paul Valéry, in his essay "Some Simple Reflections on the Body,"²² observes that in order to really understand our corporeality we need to acknowledge a kind of nonexistence. This suggests that there are primordial or pre-existent notions that form our way of being, the sensorial aspects—hearing, sight, the tactile—those phenomena that contain no cultural meaning (if indeed that is possible) yet share an universality. From this perspective, this pre-(and hence cross-) cultural foundation constitutes the beginning of human presence and of architecture itself. Louis Kahn unmistakably talked about such an architecture of beginnings and the need to sense "Volume zero. Volume minus one." This foundation also explains why, despite its being anchored to the present, presence architecture may achieve transcendence. Kahn referred to this when he thought of his own

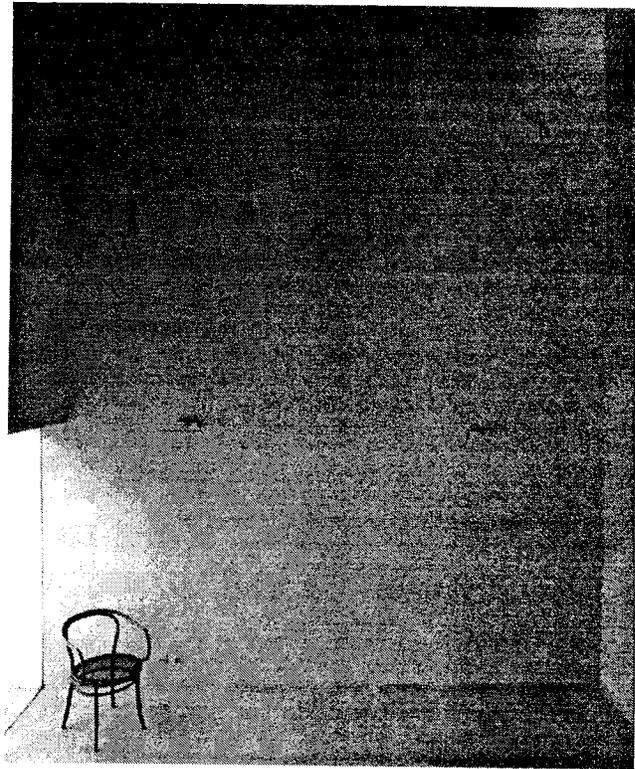


Figure 3: Alberto Campo Baeza: Garcia Marcos House in Madrid, Spain²¹

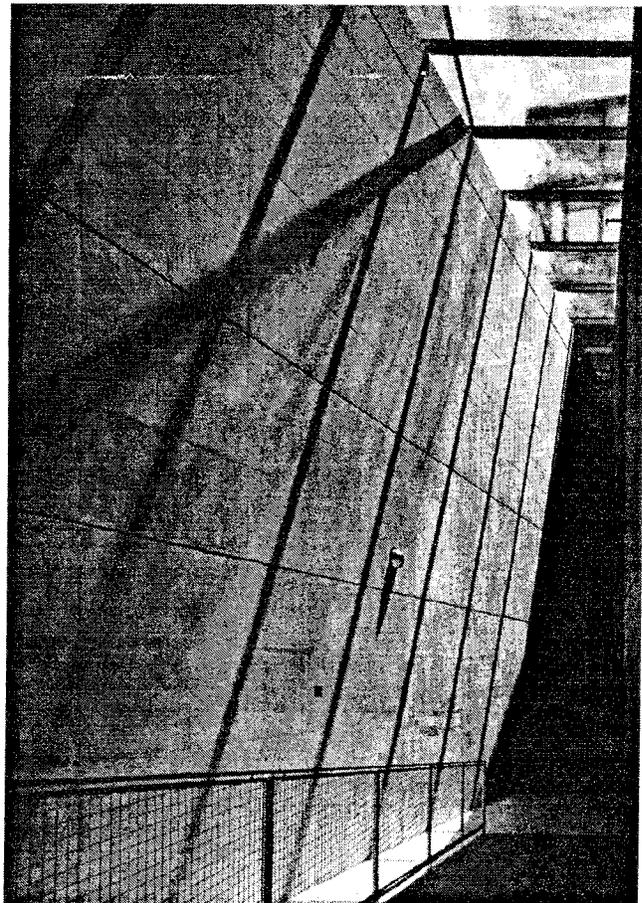


Figure 4: Tadao Ando: Forest of Tombs Museum, Kumamoto, Japan²³

buildings as eventually transcending their own zeitgeist and becoming functionless, as existing purely in and of themselves; thus, his fascination with ruins.

Although there are examples of presence architecture in history (Barragan, Kahn, Scarpa), these architectures were never intentionally produced to balance or provide an alternative to our culture of speed, simulation, and fragmentation. Contemporary architectural work related to presence is diminishing in favor of the sexier, media driven venues of simulacra. Thus it is interesting to see architects such as Campo Baeza in the West and Ando in the East continuing the process of connecting with the purely sensorial, tactile qualities of the analog, real world. But again, these productions are not conscious responses to a culture of transience. Hence, we wonder what type of architecture could be generated by seeking to creatively resist the overwhelming forces of our time.

RE-TURNING TO THE BODY

Our rational inquiry indicates that two (seemingly) different directions are emerging as possible contemporary architectural responses to the (seemingly) contrasting forces: virtuality and tectonics. As argued, we need to take no side but instead look at the problem symbiotically. This would be facilitated by finding an appropriate analogy that (1) explains in itself symbiosis while refuting dualism and (2) directly relates to the issues of virtuality, tectonics and architecture. The human body is perhaps the best candidate because it not only fulfills both criteria but also suggests maxims regarding the problem we face.

The human body is a hybrid based on symbiotic relationships that defy any clear-cut dualist differentiation. For instance, the mind, a recent evolutionary event, has been essential in the survival of the body. Without thinking (or “real virtuality” as Sanford Kwinter calls it²⁵), there would probably be no Homo Sapiens. The mind and the body require each other to unfold and deliver what we know as a human being. Their symbiosis is so strong that the malfunctioning of one dramatically affects the other. Jung and others²⁶ have shown that consciousness is a synergistic emergence out of unbreakable (i.e., symbiotic) physical and psychical functions (e.g., thinking, feeling, intuiting, sensing). Dewey and Whitehead have proven using philosophical and scientific arguments that it is misleading to dissect the human experience in dualist terms.²⁷ In turn, Merleau-Ponty and Johnson have refuted any hope of Cartesian mind-over-body dualism by showing how the phenomenology of the body has an essential impact in shaping thought.²⁸ All these and many other works point out that:

*Man is flesh, man is spirit, man is a unity of flesh and spirit. Man is something that is neither flesh nor spirit... The 'neither flesh nor spirit' here is an intermediary space... that... assimilates both flesh and spirit, the two elements of the binomial opposition; it is not a third element itself.*²⁹

All human productions, concrete and virtual, emerge from and sooner or later come back to the body. The fact that we have created the technologically virtual does not mean that these constructs are any different from concrete or intellectual tools. For, as projections of a hybrid and symbiotic body (i.e., as prostheses) all technology is ultimately uncategorizable as real or

virtual. John Dewey presents strong arguments showing that an idea is as much a tool as a hammer because both allow concrete events to take place. He concludes that “tools or instruments cut across traditional boundary lines such as those between the psychical and the physical, the inner and the outer, and the real and the ideal.”³⁰ Karen Frank’s statement is timely proof of these arguments:

*My experience of virtual reality depends upon my physical body's movement... To see I must move my head. To act upon and do things in a virtual world I must bend, reach, walk, grasp, turn around and manipulate objects... If the virtual is so physical, what body will I leave behind? Not my physical body. Without it I am in no world at all. It is physical bodies that give us access to any world.*³¹

If even in the midst of virtuality the physical body is required, then there is little doubt that tectonics, materiality, and the corporeal can never be overcome. Such an unremovable foundation offers us an analogical model to assist us in our exploration of the liminal space between presence and transience architectures without having to resort to a dualist choice or dialectic compromise. Creating symbiotic and/or hybrid constructs that expand and evolve our conceptual and practical space becomes a real possibility. The body teaches us how to both *express* and *resist* the drives of our zeitgeist.

HYBRID OR SYMBIOSIS ARCHITECTURE?

One of the arguments that has been made is that postmodernism is intentionally or effectively schizophrenic.³² Schizophrenia means to live in two completely different realities at once.³³ The dilemma of postmodernism is whether we should consider this schizophrenia as an illness to be treated or a natural quality of its zeitgeist. If we accept that this is a genuine aspect of our cultural condition, regardless of whether or not it represents either a healthy or malignant state, then we need to address how architecture might accommodate itself accordingly.

Following the lessons of the body, architecture may express the schizophrenic condition of postmodernity by (a) blurring the difference between materiality and virtuality to the point of being an indistinguishable fusion—a true *hybrid*—or (b) juxtaposing these opposites in such a way that while preserving their identities the resulting architectural order defies being broken down—a symbiosis.

The first approach considers that presence and transience architectures might be viewed as “parents” in a genetic process. The resulting “child”—the *hybrid*, is in fact a fusion, very much like the DNA genetic processing that takes place in procreation. The hybrid condition suggests a state of liminality that is neither material nor virtual—rather a kind of tectonic-virtual suspendedness. The question remains, however. Is a hybrid architecture really possible? Observing the present state of affairs no models come to mind that truly represent this notion. Is this perhaps because we, in the West, are inheritors of the dualistic Cartesian division of mind and body? On one hand our present ideological/technological dependence on specialization and categorization indicates that we exist in a highly fragmented world that negates the fusion of the real and the virtual. On the other hand, at least historically, we might say that other cultures and zeitgeists (i.e., the Byzantine, for example) were able to do so, whether conscious of the fact or not.

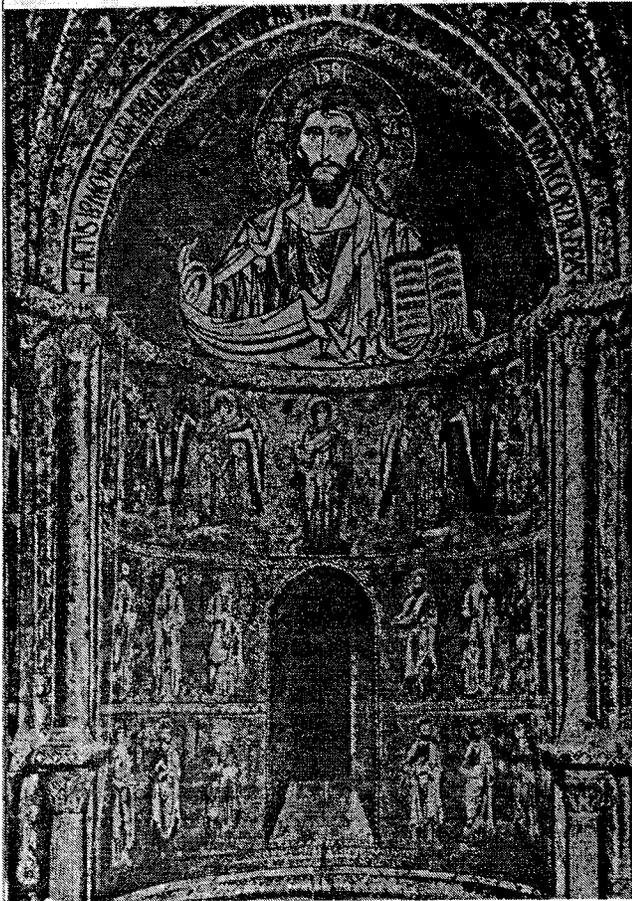


Figure 5: Cefalù. Apse mosaic in cathedral, 1148 BC.³⁶

The second approach considers that presence and transience architectures remain as distinct—in a state of *symbiosis*. Here the notion of boundary and threshold prevails. Kurokawa talks about his house as a symbiotic place in which he has the tea room (and its concomitant ceremony) next door to his computer room.³⁴ He needs to move back and forth between these two rooms in order to maintain a dynamic pluralism. Here, the experiential nature of architecture serves as the threshold, the common element that connects these seemingly dissimilar entities. As depending on a threshold, this architectural order is also paradoxical³⁵ and therefore maintains a symbiotic relationship rather than a dialectic one. Nevertheless, the fact that two situations clearly are present suggests that the symbiotic condition provides a more acceptable model for the present cultural zeitgeist.

CONCLUSION

Based on our previous observations a non-closure statement is in order. We see architecture as oscillating between a call to *express* our time and a call to creatively *resist* it. Rather than taking a side, we suggest to consider the “hybrid” and “symbiotic” as mutually compatible, yet paradoxical states that offer architecture further choice and evolution. We have used the body as a model that on one hand refutes dualism and on the other hand assists us in approaching today’s dilemma of virtuality vs. tectonics with fresh eyes. This *re-turning* to the body is thus not a returning, i.e., a nostalgic going back home. Rather

it is a critical, albeit paradoxical, *turn* to the body as a source of insight. As we have seen, the body itself is in continuous oscillation between materiality and virtuality and, not surprisingly, its products do the same. This *re-turn* means to look, listen, feel, and think about our body again as a construct that in itself provides those maxims about how to “live” our lives. Hence the solution to the dilemma that virtuality brings to our zeitgeist is not to be found in *fleeing from* but rather *re-turning to* the body.

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3. Marc Treib, “Tokyo Real and Imagined” in Susan Yelavich, ed., *The Edge of the Millennium* (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1993) pp.88-98, quote p.88
4. David Bohm, “Imagination, Fancy, Insight, And Reason In The Process Of Thought” in Shirley Sugarman, ed., *Evolution Of Consciousness* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1976). Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics* (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications Inc., 1991). Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1968). Chogyam Trungpa, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* (Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala Publications Inc., 1973). Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*. Translated by Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990)
5. John Dewey cited in Larry A. Hickman, *John Dewey's Pragmatic Technology* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990) p.154
6. Kisho Kurokawa, *The Philosophy of Symbiosis* (London: Academy Editions, 1994)
7. *Ibid.*, p.74
8. Transient comes from the Latin *trans-*, over, across + *ire*, to go. *Transience*: “the state or quality of being transient.” *Transient*: “passing away with time, transitory, fleeting. Changing very quickly so as to not apprehend or make apprehension difficult.” (The American Heritage Dictionary of English Language. New York: American Heritage Publishing Co., 1973)
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10. Julio Bermudez, “Aesthetics of Information: Cyberizing the Architectural Artifact,” in *Proceeding of the 5th. Biennial Symposium on Arts and Technology* (New London, Connecticut: Connecticut College Center for the Arts and Technology, 1995) pp.200-216
11. Terence Riley, *Light Construction* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1995)
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13. Light Architecture, *ibid.*, p.55
14. Light Architecture, *ibid.*, p.103
15. Mark Taylor & Esa Saarinen, *ibid.*
16. On this subject see: John Frazer, “The Architectural Relevance of Cyberspace,” *AD Profile #118: Architects in Cyberspace* (1995) pp.76-77. William Mitchell, *City of Bits* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995). Novak, Marcos, “Liquid Architectures in Cyberspace,” in Michael Benedikt, ed., *Cyberspace. First Steps* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991) pp.225-254
17. Little has been written on this subject as we have been fascinated by the novelty of transience and simulacra. However, all of us have also heard the counter-arguments that are perhaps most succinctly summarized by Paul

- Goldberger, "Cyberspace, Trips to Nowhere Land," *The New York Times* (Oct. 5, 1995), pp.B1-B4
18. Susan Yelavich, "Setting the Stage for the Third Millennium," in Susan Yelavich, ed., *The Edge of the Millennium* (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1993) pp.11-14, quote p.14
 19. Present comes from the Latin *praesens*: to be before one, be present; *prae* in front of + *esse*: to be (ibid.)
 20. This is almost a counter-argument to one that Italo Calvino makes about lightness. It is the very "friction" (i.e., "gravity", "weight") of reality that awakes us to our existential and reflective condition. Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for The Next Millennium* (New Yor: Vintage Books, 1993)
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 24. Ibid., p.6
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 31. Karen Frank, "When I enter Virtual Reality, What Body Will I leave Behind?" *AD Profile #118: Architects in Cyberspace*(1995) pp.20-27, quote p.20
 32. Jean Baudrillard, *ibid.* Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernim or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1992)
 33. From the Latin *schizo-phrenia*, "split mind." *Schizophrenia*: 1. a psychotic disorder characterized by loss of contact with the environment by noticeable deterioration in the level of functioning in everyday life. 2. the presence of mutually contradictory or antagonistic parts or qualities (*ibid.*)
 34. Kisho Kurokawa, *Ibid.*
 35. Mircea Eliade; *The Sacred and The Profane* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961)
 36. David Talbot Rice, *Byzantine Art* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1968) p.210