

The Bathhouse, an Interior Microcosm

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Bathhouses constitute an environmental construction marked by the architectural articulation of the physiological and the meteorological. Collective bathing spaces form autonomous spaces for immersion within altered physics, artificial environments that are internalized and isolated from the environment. The most intimate contact between the body and architecture takes place at the bath space. As an interior space that protects the naked body from the elements and society, collective bathing spaces produce an intensified, contained and controlled earthly Eden. The peculiarity of collective baths as new artificial Natures, both at a physical, meteorological, physiological and social level, allows these constructions to be referred to as interior microcosms.

TOWARDS A COLLECTIVE SENSORIUM

A junior Design Studio offered in the Fall 2016 at the University of Texas at Austin sought to examine space as a collective sensorium. The studio encouraged students to design an interior space for collective bathing as an architectural construct amplifying the human body's sensory experience. Through the design of a bathhouse, the course looked at aesthetics, sensation and interior climate as physiological responses that mediate between the body and the built environment. Situated amongst the physiological and the meteorological realm, the space of the bathhouse produces sensual exchanges between the body and architecture. The studio provided a platform for students to inquire on the following issues that have been developed in this paper: (1) public interiority as a material reflection of social and cultural values (Bathing Practices) (2) the understanding of a multisensory and physiological idea of place and the organizing role of dynamic factors like water, humidity, light and temperature (3) the disciplinary autonomy of interior space (Manufactured Microcosms, Between Skins) (4) alternative forms of socialization and public interiority (Extimacy and The Productivity of Unproductive Practices).

BATHING PRACTICES

*"The manner in which a civilization integrates bathing within its life, as well as the type of bathing it prefers, yields searching insight into the inner nature of the period. Some periods have viewed bathing as part of a broad ideal, total regeneration. Other periods have seen it as mere ablution to be performed in swiftest routine."*¹

Cleaning, which historically belonged to the spiritual or religious sphere, progressively became a part of the hygienic culture. In the last chapter of "Mechanization Takes Command", devoted to "The Mecahnization of the Bath", Giedion interprets the evolution of bathing habits throughout history as an epic struggle between mere ablution and total regeneration of the body, between simple cleaning acts and extraordinary collective acts of psychosomatic regeneration. Beginning with industrialization, the ancient custom of public bathing was reduced to a functional practice, exclusively bearing on hygiene and housed in the privacy of the domestic environment. With this change, bathing's sensory pleasures were dismissed. The modern bathtub surprisingly turns one of the most personal and intimate acts into something highly systematized, standardized and impersonal. Neutralizing the danger of its contents, the germs, determines the design of the contemporary domestic bathtub: a white, waterproof enameled surface designed to facilitate the visible evacuation of dirtiness.

Participants in the studio were encouraged to consider the design of a collective bathhouse as a material reflection of social and cultural values. Students started the semester by analyzing the habits, habitats and inhabitants of historical bathhouses. A close look at historic precedents ranging from the Roman Thermae to the Turkish Hammams exposed students to the substantial transformation of cultural meanings associated with collective bathing spaces across cultures and over the course of history. The study of these practices within the studio context revealed how varying scientific, social and cultural understandings of the human body, have given place to radically different manifestations of the relation between architecture and the body. Across history and cultures, hygienic practices can be related to what Peter Sloterdijk calls "Anthropotechnics"². This concept is a contemporary review of the Foucauldian project to identify cultural and political mechanisms of social control (biopolitics). In



Figure 1: Jupiter and Io, Antonio da Correggio, 1532–1533..

Sloterdijk's terms, "Anthropotechnics" are a set of techniques developed to modify and optimize human behavior that stem from the idea that, in order to survive as a community, individuals must reach a certain degree of control over their basic impulses through self-discipline techniques.

WATER AND THE ORGANIZING ROLE OF DYNAMIC FACTORS

*"...Water is bright and brilliant, formless and fresh, passive yet persistent in its one vice, gravity; disposing of extraordinary means to satisfy that vice, twisting, piercing, eroding, filtering... One might almost say that water is mad, because of its hysterical need to obey gravity alone, a need that possesses it like an obsession...Liquid, by definition, is that which chooses to obey gravity rather than maintain its form, which rejects all form in order to obey gravity—which makes it fast, flowing, or stagnant, formless or fearsome"*³

Water is a long-established enemy of the built environment. Persistently, water finds its way inside buildings by discovering gaps, eroding, filtering and leaking. Buildings are designed to shed water out. In a colossal and multi-faceted effort to ward off undesired water in order to avoid rotting, corrosion and mold inside built structures, the morphology and the physicality of the building envelope

has been determined across history. At the bathhouse, water is the programmatic epicenter. This course sought to examine spatial organizations defined by the active role of water, both as matter and as a source of affect. Students, studied the phenomenological possibilities afforded by water in an interior environment while pursuing the design of a bathhouse. Water dynamic states (gas/vapor/liquid) became compositional tools. Mineral elements, olfactory, visual and tactile attributes of water, as well as fluid motion and circulation, were enhanced through spatial features. At a time when our relationship to water is being profoundly endangered by climate change, reimagining the bathhouse could provide a way to celebrate water and establish an intimate bond to this resource.

MANUFACTURED MICROCOSMS

"I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space" believed Hamlet. The spatial autonomy of public interiority was a fundamental premise within the studio. Bathhouses can be understood as manufactured microcosms, in other words, manmade environments that establish an indexical and dialectic relationship between its internal micro-sphere and the external world. Public baths are an environmental construction marked by the architectural articulation of the physiological and the meteorological. Collective bathing spaces constitute autonomous spaces for immersion within altered physics, artificial environments, internalized and isolated from the environment. The most intimate contact between the body and architecture takes place at the bath space. As an interior space that protects the naked body from the elements and society, collective bathing spaces produce artificial Natures; intensified, contained and controlled earthly Edens. The voluntary immersion and conscious participation in this estrange mixture of reality and artificiality characterizes the bath users.

The interiority of the bath as a man-made, sheltered and controlled environment for the delight of the nude body holds a clear parallelism with the notion of Eden. Eden or Paradise, from the Greek *paradeisos*, which means garden, draws its roots from the Sumerian and Mesopotamian Genesis. Eden and the garden belong to the world, yet at the same time are separated from it. Historically, representation of nature was essentially dual, either as a paradise, where creatures and nature live in perfect harmony, or as a threatening and hostile medium from which man must protect himself. In this regard, the Garden of Eden is a protected interior space, within wild Nature. Nature's violence, the constant cycle of birth, death and survival struggle, are aliens to Eden, where, to the contrary, nature is exclusively generous, benign, beautiful, endless and timeless. In parallel fashion, the interior of the public bath is characterized by the atmospheric "domestication" of a confined spatial framework that is protected from the exterior. This is a physically and socially safe space that welcomes the bather's exposed, vulnerable body. The peculiarity of collective baths as new artificial Natures, both at a physical, meteorological, physiological and social level, allows these constructions to be referred to as interior microcosms. Water, air and steam circulate through a controlled circuit of arterial pipes and faucet orifices, a series of spaces delimited by warm surfaces make

the bathhouse an artificial construction close to our mammal nature. The calibrated meteorology of the baths is essentially based on the manipulation of temperature, relative air humidity and light for epidermal enjoyment. Modulating these atmospheric variables was a key compositional tool within the studio course. The design of the sequential trajectory of the body through the thermal gradient of different spaces responded to a carefully choreographed physical and sensory circuit that determined the layout of the student's proposals for a bathhouse space.

BETWEEN SKINS, FRAMING A HETEROTOPIAN CONDITION

Simultaneously intimate and foreign, our physical body feels both as an asset and a burden, loved and hated, both proximate and remote. These inward and outward perceptions contribute to an overall understanding of ourselves and the built environment. The skin of the body performs as dual agent responsible for sensory interpretation and projection of the self. Architectural surfaces also deal in inward and outward functions, modulating phenomenological attributes of space, enabling light and thermal control, and as mediums of cultural expression.

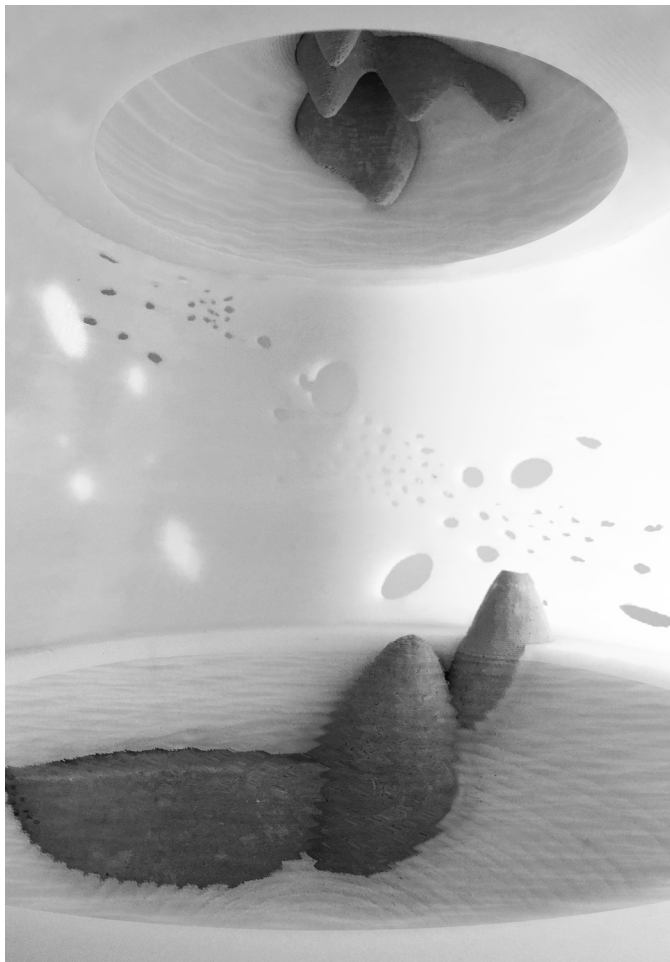


Figure 2: Student's work sample. Brennen Birch's study on individual bathing capsules with thermally active surfaces.

With a particular emphasis on the study, design, and production of interior surfaces, the interior of the bathhouse was understood as a continuous but multipurpose surface shifting from wet to dry, warm to cold, thick to thin and hard to smooth. Inside the bath house, surfaces become a second skin that is often in direct contact with the body. Students explored surface conditions attending to material properties, ergonomics, texture, thermal behavior, and allocation of the surfaces within the space. The direct relationship between the interior envelope with changing water stages, and with the epidermis of the human body, guided the design proposals in the studio. The study of interior surfaces at the site of the bath asked students to interrogate how interior spaces are shaped into a simulacrum of the body, and at the same time, influence how the body is transformed, and "architecturalized" as a distinctively socio-cultural body.

According to Foucault (1967), hammams, saunas, and by extension, collective bathing practices characteristic of several cultures, are heterotopias, utopias occupying a specific, real site, counter-spaces or "other spaces."⁴ The terms "heterotopia" and "other spaces" used by Foucault mean the same: hetero (other) and topos (place, space). He uses this term to describe spatial constructions upon which society projects a narrative, elevating them to a special rank, heterotopias are associated with cultural symbols. For example, the idea of religious purification, associated with Muslim hammams, makes these spaces transcend their material condition as a physical space, taking on an added spiritual value in the collective imagination. Bathhouses are spaces that link physical realities and cultural notions such as: healing, wellbeing, purification etc.

*"heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place." "Heterotopias are most often linked with slices in time"... "The heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time."*⁵

The space of the bath house begins to function at full capacity when users arrive at a sort of absolute break with their day to day routine. The hedonism that characterizes the bathing experience involves a subjective break from the course of time. Interior skins play a key role in the confinement of bathing spaces. Surface treatments can contribute to the denial, dilation and interruption of time. Eliminating exterior visual references conditions and limits the perception of time, giving way to a timeless experience of the present in relation to the exterior world. Reflexive introspection on sensory pleasures temporarily dilates the perception of time. Time during the bath is experienced as an elastic condition amplified by the senses. Finally, as a leisure activity, the bath interrupts the day-to-day rationalization of time, providing a temporary break for rest, or momentary evasion.

EXTIMACY

The bathhouse, as a programmatic subject, led students to reflect on alternative forms of socialization and public interiority across history and cultures. Without garments or material possessions to

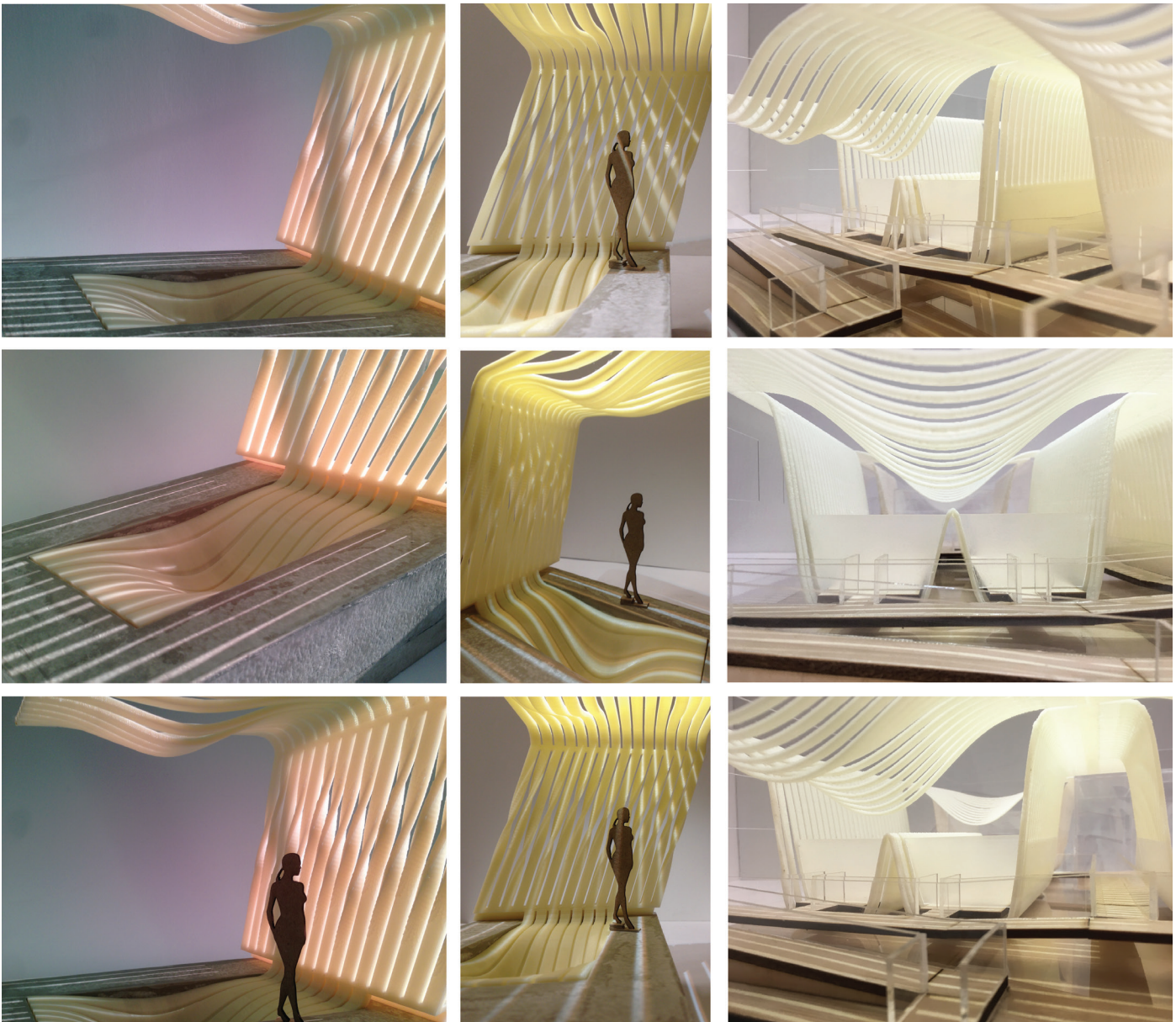


Figure 3: Student's work sample. Surface studies by Janet Chen.

identify the bather's socioeconomic identity, the bathing space is, in principle, essentially egalitarian. Historically, public baths offered a privileged space for meeting and collective interaction, thus contributing to strengthening the community as an agent of social integration. The bathhouse was a key public institution which defied the contemporary association of intimacy with privacy. "Extimacy", the term coined by Jacques Lacan⁶ in the context of critical psychology, could be used here to describe a programmatic condition that combines intimacy with publicness. Extimacy can challenge established social constructs enabling unscripted non-hierarchical encounters to take place. Rem Koolhaas identified this condition. In his project "Exodus, or the voluntary prisoners of architecture", a collective bath, the "Institute of Creation and Implementation of Fantasies", forms an essential part of the project, becoming probably one of the most well-known and disseminated illustrations from

the proposal. Koolhaas' description of the "Institute of Creation and Implementation of Fantasies" reads: *"The function of the Baths is to create and recycle private and public fantasies, to invent, test, and possibly introduce new forms of behavior. The building is a social condenser."*⁷

Nudity (or semi-nudity) makes the bath an exceptional social space. As a shelter for the nude body, different principles related to religion, hygiene, eroticism, sexuality, modesty and medicine have taken place in these architectures, in modifying bathing habits and in the type of practices and behaviors socially accepted inside. The bath as a collective space and public institution questions the association of intimacy with privacy. When shared publicly, nudity, creates a singular social space. The essentially introspective sensory practice of bathing, when it is shared socially, creates a programmatic condition that blurs the traditional distinction between public and private. A look back to collective bathing institutions, reflects that as

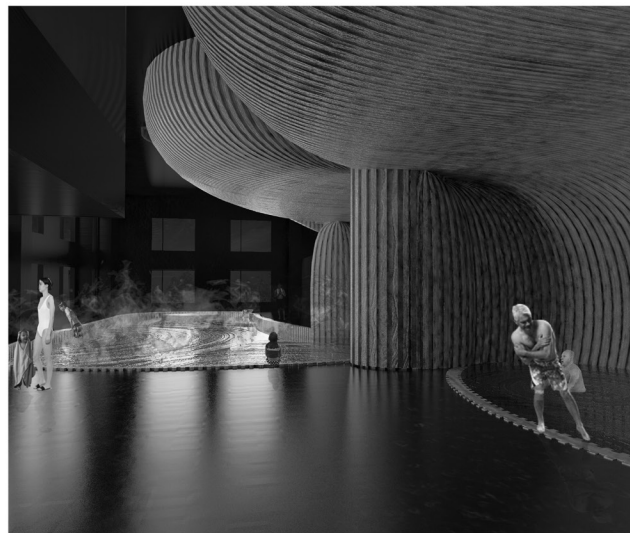


Figure 4: Student's work samples: Hannah Griffiths, Madison Schel, Janet Chen, Kate Krikorian & Kaylen Parker.

a social condenser, collective bathing is a double-edged social sword both inclusive and exclusive. With no wardrobe and belongings as symbols of identity, the physical differences between bodies come to the forefront. At times, the degree of intimacy shared in the bath has made its architecture a stage for social segregation. Tensions and conflicts regarding gender differences, sexual orientation, racial identity and socioeconomic status grow more acute within this architectural framework. The practice of collective bathing contributes to a feeling of inclusiveness amongst its participants, at the same time, indirectly contributes to the exclusion of the “others,” those who are not a part of said community.

LEISURE AND THE PRODUCTIVITY OF UNPRODUCTIVE SPACES

*“The role that bathing plays within a culture reveals the culture’s attitude toward human relaxation. It is a measure of how far individual well-being is regarded as an indispensable part of community life.”*⁸

Finally, the studio opened up an implicit inquiry about the nature of leisure and wellbeing in contemporary society. Leisure is an intrinsic aspect to the hedonistic act of bathing. The distinction between the changing historical notions of this concept was discussed within the studio. Giedion was a firm advocate for the Greco-Roman concept of comprehensive psychosomatic regeneration associated to bathing. In “Mechanization takes command”, Giedion reflects on the difference between the Roman term “otium” and the contemporary meaning of leisure, as it appeared with the consolidation of the industrial society. Otium, in classical terms, referred to an estate of productive inactivity, a necessary creative idleness, which is opposed to the contemporary notion of leisure as a vehicle for evasion and temporary escape from the daily routine. Contemporary spas are usually reserved to an economic elite. The classic bath, as a free and daily practice of roman citizens, and a fundamentally contemplative experience based on the pleasure of simply relaxing while immersed in the water, is an activity that Giedion points out has no place in our society’s utilitarianism.

“A period like ours, which has allowed itself to become dominated by production, finds no time in its rhythms for institutions of this kind. That is why the nineteenth century failed in its efforts to revive the regeneration of former ages or to devise new types shaped to our specific needs. Such institutions stood in contradiction to the period.”

*“Regeneration is something that cannot arise in isolation. It is part of a broader concept: leisure. Leisure, in this sense, means a concern with things beyond the merely useful. Leisure means to have time. Time to live. Live can be tasted to the full only when activity and contemplation, doing and not doing, form complementary poles, like those of a magnet. None of the great cultures has failed to support this concept.”*¹⁰

In a contemporary society, characterized by constant digital media participation in experiences that take place far from our body horizon, the ability to concentrate on the present presents a challenge. The current obsession to digitally micro-monitor health, constantly recording eating habits, exercise and even sleep, with smartphones,

smartwatches or other gadgets, can be alienating. Antoine Picon has speculated on how one of architecture’s missions in the future might be to protect us from “too much exposure to the invisible flows of information that structure our lives” and to counteract the “hustle and bustle of the digital world, instead of mimicking its agitation.”¹¹ Aquatic immersion, synchronization with the body’s biological rhythm and epidermal activation through thermal contrast, are sensorial anchors enabling our attention to focus on the perception of the present. This studio considered how intense physical sensory stimulation can contribute to the reconciliation of the body and the mind.

CONCLUSION

Interiority, as a material manifestation of prevailing behavioral models, is not just a disconnected environment concealed within architecture, but an exterior infold, a medium inseparable from its inhabitants’ relationship to society’s cultural, economic and political conditions. Sloterdijk’s view of the world as a “grand interior” responds to the progressive interiorization of the environment where both culture, and even nature, have increasingly become “indoor affairs”. The student’s focus on the design of an “interior microcosms” aimed to stress how the definition of interior habitats is a primary aspect of our discipline. The program of the bathhouse served to highlight the agency of public interiors at a material, climatic, cultural and social level.

ENDNOTES

1. Siegfried Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command* (Oxford University Press, 1969), 628.
2. Peter Sloterdijk, *You Must Change your Life* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014).
3. Francis Ponge, “Water” in *The Nature of Things* (Red Dust, 1995), 37.
- 4/5. Michael Foucault, “Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias,” in *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* 5 (1984): 46-49. Original publication: *Conférence au Cercle d’études architecturales*, March 14th, 1967. <https://foucault.info/doc/documents/heterotopia/foucault-heterotopia-en-html>
6. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Vol. Book VII, (New York: Norton & Company, 1997)
7. Rem Koolhaas, Madelon Vreindorp, Elia Zenghelis, & Zoe Zenghelis, “Exodus, or the voluntary prisoners of architecture” (1972).
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10. Ibid, 712.
11. Antoine Picon, *Digital Culture in Architecture: An Introduction for the Design Professions* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2010), 103.
12. Peter Sloterdijk, *In the world Interior of Capital* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2013), 170.