

Paydirt

pay dirt (n)
earth or ore that yields profit to a miner
a useful or remunerative discovery or object

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GENESIS AND BODY

In ex-nihilo narratives of creation, something is created from nothing. To build is to write one such narrative, where substance replaces absence, where matter takes the place of the void. Making of any kind is an act of bringing-into-being, one that yields tangible things that point to their maker and also turn away, assuming a life of their own.

We make things so that we know we are here. Every mark we draw is evidence of our existence, reassurance that we are noticeable – that we matter – during the time we occupy our bodily envelope on the march from birth to death. The ideas that we realize – those we give form to – will outlive us, and through them we may be able to briefly touch a perception of immortality.

Plato might call this the short view, for he argued that ideas (non-material, abstract forms) are more fundamental and universal than those things relegated to the sensible and substantial world. Nonetheless, the scale and duration of the universe are hard targets to mark, and each one of us has a very different sense of time (in the hundreds, maybe thousands of years, not the trillions) when it comes to imagining, practicing and noticing acts of registration.

In a recent New York Times op-ed piece, the philosopher Richard Kearney questioned whether we are “losing touch with the sense of touch itself” and suggested that we have entered an “age of excarnation.”¹ The ubiquity of Design-Build may be in part a reaction to a de-fleshing of architectural practice, whereby we seek to know the corpus of the built thing by privileging not only its body but our own as well.

KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE

A “doubting Thomas” is someone who refuses to believe something without direct, personal experience. The term is derived from an account in the Gospel of John, in which the Apostle Thomas does not believe that Jesus appeared to the other Apostles, not until Jesus reappears and invites him to touch his wounds, to “Reach



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hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing.”²

At what point can we say we ‘believe’ in architecture? Do we need to experience it in-the-flesh in order to know something about it? Plenty of designs have never been built, and some of them – especially those of the more theoretical and visionary variety – are firmly positioned in architectural discourse – Etienne-Louis Boullée and Jean-Jacques Lequeu, for example, or on the more contemporary spectrum Archigram and Lebbeus Woods. The conceptual nature of their work does not make it unbelievable. Yet we know it within its own limit of body-less-ness – so we evaluate it not as if it is here, but in such a way that it informs what is, has been, and might be here. We live in the idea-bodies of the built things imagined by these architects, all of whom regularly omit human figures in their drawings. In the face of these works, which are literally figurative, there is more a desire for metaphysics than for empiricism.

The relationship between experience and knowledge, between touch and truth are the subject of many philosophical battles – empiricists like Locke, Berkeley and Hume insisted that all our knowledge comes from experience while rationalists like Descartes and Leibniz asserted that in addition to what we know through experience, there are certain innate principles that we know independently of experience. Woven through these conversations are ideas about the role and value of the senses. Claims of superiority and inferiority abound – the two that have done the most battle are sight and touch, the visual and the tactile. Denis Diderot, for one, came down on the side of touch and described the senses as if they had human attitudes and characteristics – in a most embodied way – : “I consider that they eye is the most superficial, the ear the proudest, the nose the most voluptuous, the palate the most superstitious and capricious, the touch the most profound and philosophic.”³

Figure 1: Caravaggio, *The Incredulity of St. Thomas*, 1601-2

ENDNOTES

1. Richard Kearney, "Losing Our Touch." *The New York Times*, August 30, 2014.
2. The Bible, King James Version, John 20:24-29
3. Beatrix L. Tollemache, Trans. Denis Diderot's *Thoughts on Art and Style* (London: Remington & Co. Ltd., 1893), 175.
4. See Machiavelli, *The Prince*, or Michael Walzer, *The Problem of Dirty Hands*.
5. Matthew B. Crawford, *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009.)
6. Matthew B. Crawford, "The Case for Working With Your Hands", *The New York Times*, May 21, 2009.
7. Christopher Lowry et al., "Identification of an Immune-Responsive Mesolimbocortical Serotonergic System: Potential Role in Regulation of Emotional Behavior", *Neuroscience*, March 28, 2007.



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Figure 2: Michigan Artist Alfred Castagne sketching WPA construction workers, 1939

It might be that the separation of the roles of designer and builder privileges vision over touch, especially given the increasingly immaterial sites of architectural conception. A corollary in this case is that vision is privileged over experience, something the Danish architect and urbanist Jan Gels noted when he coined the term 'birdshit architecture' – buildings dropped into cities as if from above, understood from an aerial and formal viewpoint that has little to do with how they are for human beings on the ground. Combining the roles of designer and builder conjoins vision and touch, at least putting them on equal footing. In this scenario, the tactile and experiential are essential to the design process. Some other things creep in, too – one of them is labor.

LABOR AND VALUE

Hands that carry out manual labor – dirty hands – are complex socioeconomic symbols. They simultaneously belong to the image of the brute, unsophisticated worker and to that of the ethical soul made honest through physical work.

Those who engage work that is primarily physical have historically occupied the lower rungs of the class ladder. Much menial work is unpleasant, underpaid, underappreciated, grueling – and the people who do it are often invisible and exploited. The miner who unearths the diamond is not likely to be the one who buys it; the housekeeper who cleans rooms at a high-end hotel is not likely to be a guest there; the garment worker sweating over brand jeans is not likely to wear them. Those who do the jobs others don't want to are and were background shadow figures, rarely seen or heard. They are typically un- or under- educated and cannot easily move about in the levels of society that they serve. The dirt on their hands is a sign – a class-ification.

Yet those who are willing to get their hands dirty, who have a choice in the matter, can be perceived quite differently. These might, for example, be people who will engage all aspects of a task, even the unsavory parts – who will jump into the fray rather than sit as a strategist-from-afar. Or, they might be politicians of the Machiavellian or Walzerian persuasion, who commit immoral acts for the greater moral good.⁴ In both of these cases, someone with dirty hands commands respect.

Art history gives us another turn, with a plenitude of images of idealized laborers – many created by artists who identified deeply with their subjects. This conflagration of artist and idealized laborer has at times been deeply magnified, as in this photograph taken by a WPA photographer of a WPA artist sketching WPA construction workers in the field. The production of this image, by a laborer of a laborer of other laborers, compounds the perception of these figures as near-mythical – imbued with more importance, perhaps, than those the photograph does not reveal.

It can be argued that the designer|builder is an embedded character in this representational story, one that aligns more strongly with that of the artist/laborer than with that of the architect. Famous architects are not dirty in pictures – they wear white collars and black glasses – and their portraits, self- or otherwise, more closely recall Medieval and Renaissance images of scholars and saints alone in their studies. There is a class story here for sure, one that pits maker against thinker, material against idea, handwork against mindwork, the common against the elite.

In another recent *New York Times* article, written by Matthew B. Crawford, a PhD turned motorcycle mechanic who also wrote a book called *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work*,⁵ the author reflects on the popularity of TV shows like "Deadliest Catch" and "Dirty Jobs", and concludes that "The weird fascination of these shows must lie partly in the fact that...confrontations with material reality have become exotically unfamiliar. Many of us do work that feels more surreal than

real.”⁶ He also speaks about the different kinds of intellectual habits he cultivates in his shop (diagnosis and the larger gestalt, judgment and hunches based on experience, attentiveness vs. assertiveness). And he observes that when he was writing for a living, he was always tired, whereas when he’s working on a machine – even if doing so entails standing on a concrete floor all day – he feels energized. The unending calls to physical exercise and warnings about the dangers of sitting still are most everywhere – maybe quietly suggesting that the design mind should not be not separated from the design body – and that there might be a turn towards something called design health (not to be confused with health care design).

DIRT AND WATER

Dirt has been not only a social and ethical tag, but also a slippery subject in its relationship to hygiene. If regular and luxurious bathing were celebrated in ancient Greece and Rome, the 17th century European aristocracy shunned water. Rolling up the shirtsleeve of a perfumed royal was likely to reveal a line separating skin that had seen water from that which had not. At that juncture was the release of the sheltered stench of the unbathed, a state considered more healthy than cleanliness. Water (hot water, especially) was perceived as dangerous because it opened the skin to ‘miasmas’ – germs that were thought to float in the air and enter the pores, causing disease. A layer of grime blocked them. Louis XIII of France was not given a bath until he was seven, James I of England never washed his body in his life – only his fingers.

Public health reform in the 19th century made the need for basic hygiene understood. However, the pendulum has swung to the opposite extreme. Now we keep company with antibacterial soaps and hand sanitizers and post signs reminding when and how to wash our hands – around food, illness, wounds, toilets, diapers, phlegmatic expressions, animals, garbage. Bathrooms look increasingly like temples of cleanliness, returning us to an expression found in Babylonian and Hebrew religious tracts: “cleanliness is next to godliness.” Some immunologists believe that our hyperclean environments, which not only espouse cleanliness but the lack of touch at all (automatic flushing toilets, foot operated taps, pressure-sensitive door handles), are actually disabling our immune systems. The “hygiene hypothesis” – also known as the “biome depletion theory” – posits that reduced microbial exposure due may in fact cause disease. Some scientists believe that the microbes in soil are actually natural antidepressants: *Mycobacterium vaccae* is one substance found in soil that is being studied for its potential ability to stimulate serotonin production.⁷

The surge in educational and professional popularity of Design-Build is occurring at the same time that we are spending less and less time outside, less and less time playing in the dirt. Our bodies are more and more stilled in adjustable rolling chairs in front of screens. Revit and Rhino, laser cutters and 3D printers, do a lot of great work, but they limit how much we move and what we touch – and as a result, change how well and what we know about and might propose for the corporeal, material and spatial world.

DESIGN AND BUILD

Design-Build may be pedagogically and practically current, but what interests me most about it is how it is tied to a larger discourse about what it means to think through our hands, how our direct involvement with the stuff of building informs how we design, and how the movements of our bodies (our work outs) shape space. This discourse includes long-standing political, philosophical, religious and legal narratives that consider the relationships I only touched on here – relationships between knowledge and experience, labor and value, immaterial and material, hygiene and health.



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Figure 1: Rembrandt van Rijn, *Scholar in his Study*, 1634

Figure 2: Le Corbusier in *Life* magazine, 1965