

REVIEW

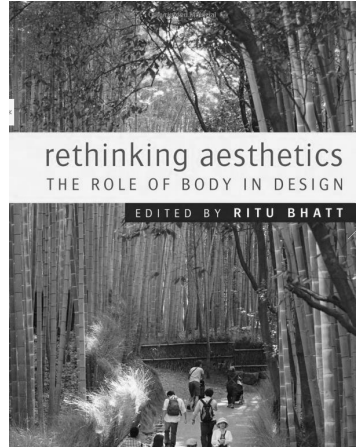
RETHINKING AESTHETICS: THE ROLE OF BODY IN DESIGN,
EDITED BY RITU BHATT

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REVIEWED BY TOM SPECTOR



The driving force behind the corporeal turn in recent philosophy is to overcome what many see as a stultifying reliance on the eye in the Western canon of aesthetics for both knowing and appreciating the world. Developments in neuroscience would bear-out this effort. Knowing is closely tied to the emotions and the emotions are closely tied to the more immersive senses of touch, taste, hearing and smell. By paying closer attention to non-visual ways of perceiving, designers stand to make their work more responsive to desires for a more fully experienced world. Contributing to this endeavor, Ritu Bhatt has convened some of the most well-known names in the philosophy of embodied aesthetics and in the role of the body in design to bring together the under-theorized disciplines of architecture and aesthetics, and to explore how dissolving certain disciplinary boundaries could help reconsideration of the body in design. While the results of this cross-disciplinary work give encouraging signs of the vitality of this line of inquiry, any such work inevitably leads to questions of the state of the sub-discipline and the identity of the audience. The mostly engaging and well-written essays fall short of providing clear answers to these questions.

The book is divided into two sections; the “Role

of Aesthetic Response in Everyday Life,” and “Modes of Aesthetic Response: Tacit Perception and Somatic Consciousness.” It begins with well-established pragmatist philosopher Richard Shusterman’s “Everyday Aesthetics of Embodiment.” Since his book *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, in which he lays out the concept of “somaesthetics,” Shusterman has been a prominent exponent of the embodied nature of aesthetic response. So it makes sense that he would lead-off the essays. But the piece is also a wonderfully clear-headed account of his efforts to sensitize himself to an embodied consciousness—especially of the associated increased sensory participation (perhaps we should call it a renewed aesthetic living) possible to achieve, in his case, by immersion in a Zen Buddhist school in Japan.

This essay is followed by Mark Johnson’s “Dewey’s Big Idea for Aesthetics” In which Johnson gives a concise explanation of Deweyan aesthetics:

Art reveals, through immediate presentation of qualitative unities, the meaning and significance of some aspect of our world, either as it was, is, or might be.... Dewey’s central question here is how art realizes meaning. His answer is that art achieves meaning by enacting in us a heightened awareness of the “pervasive unifying quality” of a given situation.” Johnson then argues for a set of implications that follow from a Deweyan interpretation of art and aesthetics. Most importantly, “Pervasive qualitative unity” is what makes an experience aesthetic. Furthermore, this unity is the main point of works of art. These two ideas imply the third point that “any aesthetic theory or critical analysis that attends only to selected features of an artwork will necessarily fail to capture what is most important (pg. 42).

Johnson’s reappraisal of Dewey’s relevance provides both a sensitive and well-reasoned set of implications for embodied aesthetics.

Three more essays round-out Part One. Sonit Bafna provides a worthwhile close reading of an iconic building in downtown Atlanta, Marcel Breuer’s Atlanta Public Library, completed in 1980. While it is delightful to revisit a building that asserted high modernism on a mostly unappreciative town, it is curious that the essay is primarily concerned with the visual in a book emphasizing embodiment.

Following Bafna, Remei Capdevila-Werning’s essay on symbolism in buildings rides a mini-wave of a resurgence of interest in Nelson Goodman. The author reminds us of the Nelsonian ways in which buildings convey meaning through the “main modes” of “denotation and exemplification” and the lesser modes of expression and indirection (pg. 89). But the meanings of these terms get stretched a bit. Does the Villa Rotunda “symbolize harmonic proportions” as the author asserts (pg. 88), or does it enact them and realize them? The further assertion that “there are no true or false interpretations,

but rather, right or wrong, adequate or inadequate to the work's symbolic functioning" is perplexing (pg. 94). How could an interpretation be right or wrong if it is completely uncoupled from its being true or false? Capdevila-Werning would have it that fitness or aptness would suffice, but how could these concepts be stable without some correspondence theory of truth under them?

Chris Abel's nearly forty-page essay "The Extended Self" tells the story of twentieth century architects' naïve attempts to capture embodiment, the more sophisticated explanations provided by Polanyi, and confirmation by more recent developments in neuroscience. The purpose is to provide a convincing argument for the existence in all humans of extensive body maps. These well-developed maps, the author hopes, could be used to provide a more psychologically sound basis for teaching design than do current methods that more resemble indoctrination. Though they do not directly engage architecture theory, these ideas could surely be the basis for substantial further work.

Part Two opens with Galen Crazz's "Somatics and Aesthetics" which both condenses and builds on her exploration of the near environment provided by her well-regarded book *The Chair*. The essay provides a concise look into somatics – the conceptual fusing of sensation, emotion and knowledge – with examples of its implications for design thinking based especially in the author's knowledge of the Alexander Technique.

Following Crazz, Yuriko Saito's "The Moral Dimension of Japanese Aesthetics" is one of the standout essays in the volume. Her main point, similar to the one Kant attempted to establish in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, is that aesthetic sensitivity enhances one's ability to act ethically. Her examples drawn from Japanese arts provide vivid examples of the relationship between aesthetic and

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moral concepts. These examples also seem capable of extension into other cultures.

Editor Ritu Bhatt's own contribution discusses the relevance of both Feng shui and Christopher Alexander's *A Pattern Language* as illustrative of "unconscious relationships with space, day-to-day cognition, and normative frameworks of knowledge" (pg. 183). Bhatt wishes, not to promote either concept, but rather to use their persistence as traditional agent-empowering practices to help overcome the seemingly intractable opposition between high modernist presumptions to get at architecture's essence on the one hand, and post-critical assertions that such theoretical projects are best left alone on the other. While bringing some rapprochement to these conflicting outlooks would be welcome, it is a lot to ask of these two examples. While both Feng shui and *A Pattern Language* are intimately connected with embodiment in space, it is hard to say what is new that either brings to the discussion.

The last two essays, David Seamon's short "Environmental Embodiment, Merlau-Ponty, and Hillier's Theory of Space Syntax" and Juhani Pallasmaa's "Mental and Existential Ecology" should be seen more as survey pieces suggestive of future areas of inquiry than as presenting a sustained argument. Seamon's straightforward aim is to introduce Merlau-Ponty to sociologies of space, place and body. Pallasmaa introduces a basketful of concepts: "loss of silence," mediation between "world and self," the neurobiological insights of artists, "existential space," the primacy of touch, the loss of hapticity and how architecture structures not only experiences but our inner world. The essay's speculative nature makes the reader wonder if it would have been better placed as an introductory piece. Perhaps its inclusion at the end of the volume was meant to leave readers with a sense of large vistas yet to come, but those of us who want to know if this new cross-disciplinary effort has direction will not come away with any strong compass points.