Body-subject’s Knowledge of the World in Architectural Representation

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Abstract
The architectural tradition from Vitruvius, Alberti, Filarete, and Di Giorgio Martini to Le Corbusier can be characterized as anthropomorphic insofar as it consciously appeals to the human body as the standard of proportion and figure. However, the body has maintained an elusive relationship to the built environment, despite a long history of presuming the naturalness of this relationship and building simply as the image of man. Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain* and Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *The Visible and Invisible* contribute to a relevant twentieth-century body image. This body image differs from that of early modernity. Early modern philosophers and architects conceived the body as a rational, symmetric whole, and they transferred this symmetry to their buildings. The twentieth century body image is not symmetrical and whole but fragmented and re-incorporated. Therefore, it is not often reflected in our built world. Thinking with the body is merely another mode of inhabiting the world, and should be considered on equal footing with other modes of thought. Perception is neither a passive registering nor an active imposing of a meaning; it is “a living dialogue” between the body and things. Based on vision and experience, Scarpa used implicitly a conceptual body and the physical body of the visitor. By adopting the basic position of Merleau-Ponty about the primacy of perception, this study is intended to discuss how the structure of the phenomenological body implies the structure of the entire perceptual field, and identify how Scarpa in the Brion Cemetery conceives the method of architectural signification based upon the body and its physical relationship with the forms.

Keywords: body, Scarpa, subject, lived experience, metaphor, world

Introduction
The body has always maintained an elusive relationship to the built environment, despite a long history of presuming the naturalness of this relationship and buildings simply as the image of man. Jean Baudrillard deplores the loss of the body’s ability to protect the individual from the bombardment of communication, and likens the current condition to schizophrenia (Baudrillard, 1983). As the repressed histories of marginalized lives and cultures continue to surface, the irreducible presence of the body poses itself as a challenge to the dominant cultural modes of abstraction and the manipulation of desires. Either interpretation demonstrates an impotence of the body in relation to the environment, one which calls into question the individual’s capacity to define Self.

Traditionally we have adopted two approaches to understanding the mind-body relationship: we have detached subjectivity from the body and made the latter an object existing in itself and reducible to the sum of its parts; and we have put the primacy on a kind of thought which strips the body of its perspectivity and offers it up as an absolute object to the disinterested gaze of a disembodied consciousness. In either case, we have bypassed our actual experience and have chosen to ignore the fact that the body is ours. Thinking through the body instead of “about” the body removes the scientific prejudices of action/reaction as well as the notion of body as pure object and mind as pure subject. Thinking with the body is merely another mode of inhabiting the world, and should be considered on equal footing with other modes of thought.

Early modern philosophers and architects conceived the body as a rational, symmetric whole, and they transformed this symmetry to their buildings. One of the fundamental issues in architectural design is the relationship between architectural form and the human body. Today it is imperative to use scale figures in drawings because current design methods do not necessarily produce architecture which takes into account human experience and dimensions. The field of ergonomics is based on this necessity; traditionally these relationships were implicit and an integral part of the approaches to form-making. The twentieth-century body image is not symmetrical and whole but fragmented and re-incorporated. This body image, however, unlike that of early modernity, has not been dominantly recognized by architects. Thus, it is not often reflected in our constructed world.

In architecture, Scarpa applied different methods to the relationship between the human figure and
architectural form, either making a clear analogy or provoking an obvious contrast between them. Many of his forms appear to be symbolic representations of something. He tried to show both what the forms represent abstractly (the signified) and how the sign itself is constructed (the signifier). Rather than using a form of communication and a formal representation to scale and dimension, Scarpa placed the ontological dimension of human figures in his projects by responding to human gestures and actions. On the basis of body-subject’s knowledge of the world, bodies become lived experiences in Scarpa’s works. By adopting the basic position of Merleau-Ponty about the primacy of perception, this study is intended to discuss how the structure of the phenomenological body implies the structure of the entire perceptual field, and describe how people in the West in the twentieth century understand the body, and identify how Scarpa in the Brion Cemetery conceives the method of architectural signification based upon the body and its physical relationship with the forms.

Nature of Body in the Twentieth Century

Our body image is responsible for constituting our world by establishing the position we adopt with respect to everything external to us. However, this notion changes throughout history. For this we must actively engage the question of being, of what the nature of our body image is. There are two ambivalent configurations of body image. On the one hand, there is the body conceived of as an object of technological manipulation and exploitation. In this sense, the body is considered as an instrument of production as well as of cultivated consumption. On the other hand, there is a refined sensibility attuned to the body. For this body, there is always a desire to develop new, more subtle, and stronger feelings and values.

Many philosophers and scholars have tried to develop an idea of body image since the eighteenth century. Our current vision of the world and body posits the universe as a completely rational equation. In order to elude the pitfalls that historical situatedness poses for the renovation of our body image we will have to distance ourselves from the traditional metaphysical and epistemological assumptions with which we normally operate. In this paper, two body images are described: Elaine Scarry’s concept of the body as a metaphor of language and Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the body as a structure of relationships.

1. The Body as a Metaphor of Language

Elaine Scarry (1985) shows in her book, The Body in Pain that the infliction of pain in torture is the most inhuman act we can perform. The argument concerns nothing less than the human ability to create, to imagine, and then give material expression and shape to the multifarious assemblage of artifacts, ranging from forks and coats to cities, poems, philosophical treatises and piano sonatas, that constitute what we think of as civilization. At the same time, the argument concerns the human ability to uncreate, or to deconstruct the world—an ability whose most “perfect” representative is torture and whose only slightly less “perfect” representative is war.

According to Scarry, the human body is the focus and central support of both making and unmaking, specifically the body in its most exclusively sentient, most heavily embodied state—that of pain. It is the state of bodily pain or deprivation that impels the imagination to produce objects that might relieve that pain, either in fact (hunger causes me to imagine and to seek food) or merely by acting as a symbolic substitute for pain’s attributes. In such acts of imaginative creation, the utterly private and uncommunicable state of pain is projected outward onto the world, where it becomes shareable as well as, one hopes, relievable.

Scarry argues that intense pain is world-destroying (Scarry, 1985). It is analogous to death. Both torture and death, in their total aversiveness, annihilate humanness: death through the cessation of sentience, torture through its grotesque overload. The shrieks and groans of a tortured body signal the destruction not only of language but also of any psychological content. In the absence of torture, it is the objectified world that is progressively eliminated as the tortured body is reduced to the contracted, inarticulate state in which nothing exists for it other than its own pain. In both instances, the body enters a process of symbolic substitution, but in opposite directions. In imaginative creation, the body finds a substitute or sign that can represent its pain or take its place; in torture, the body itself is made to represent, through the concreteness of its pain, the otherwise abstract agency and power of the torturer.

Scarry offers a phenomenology of pain within the context of its historical and cultural realization. By insisting upon the brute existential reality of pain, the sheer aversiveness of it, its gratuitousness, and its investment in the isolated individual body, Scarry shows that pain is the very condition of the human ‘subject’. Referring to its essential privacy and incommunicability, Scarry says of the subject: “To acknowledge the radical subjectivity of pain is to acknowledge the simple and absolute incompatibility of pain and world” (Scarry, 1985).

Scarry’s notion of the radical subjectivity of pain creates an absolute other of the subject in pain. The procedures by which the knowledge of pain is produced, which make possible the deliberate infliction of pain by one set of human beings upon another (in torture, war, and violence of all kinds), are equally based upon the universal experience of pain. It is the shared knowledge/experience of pain that unites sufferer, torturer and helper. In war, the ability of the injured body to provide analogical verification for something outside played out not between individual persons, but between persons and the state.

For Scarry the body becomes what one has, rather than what one is. When Scarry argues that the creating
phenomenon arises out of framing intentional relationships between physical pain and imagined objects (Scarry, 1985), she does not categorize the “made-up” as “artifact” but as the “fictional object” which can be made real, that is, into an artifact. For instance, one can re-make the fictional chair he is now imagining into a “made-real” one that he sits on. Scarry is explicit that the relation between the “made-up” and “made-real” object is not one of equivalence but representation. The “sharable” quality of the extended “made-real” points to its non-equivalence with the non-sharable “made-up.” Scarry argues:

It is through this movement out into the world that the extreme privacy of the occurrence (both pain and imagining are invisible to anyone outside the boundaries of the person’s body) begins to be sharable, that sentence becomes social and thus acquires its distinctively human form (Scarry, 1985).

The artifact is a fragment or reiteration of the body. It is an extension of bodily intent and desire which focuses or concentrates the power or qualities of the body. By magnifying our visual powers, it opens us to areas of our world which were previously uninhabitable and unknown to us. This transference of our embodied nature onto artifacts is evident in varying degrees depending on the object. The tool is a magnification of power. In architecture, the relationship is not merely the superficial transmutation of physiological parts into the building elements; it is, rather, the active engagement of the nature of our body, of a body image and its transformation into built form.

2. The Body as a Structure of Relationships

In recollecting we do not intend to subvert empirical knowledge. Our body is not just an object among other objects to be studied with purely rational scientific scrutiny, but rather the means by which objects are there for us. It is our only means for having a world. In The Visible and Invisible, Merleau-Ponty (1968) invents a new idiom for treating an array of classical dichotomies including mind/body, essence/existence, and subject/object relations. He introduces such new concepts as ‘chiasm’ and ‘flesh’ and gives special senses to ‘the visible’ and ‘the invisible.’

The most important of these new terms is Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the chiasm. A simple example of Merleau-Ponty’s use of “chiasm” is the ability of the body to touch itself. I can place the palm of my right hand on my left elbow and feel the elbow. But with a simple change of attention, I can use my elbow to feel my palm. I can move from palming my elbow to elbowing my palm. The touching hand thus takes its place among the things it touches. It both opens up the realm of tangible beings and becomes one of them. This experience, which usually goes unnoticed, is a simple instance of the chiasm relation.

A second experience which reflects the chiasm relation occurs in vision. “Seeing,” Merleau-Ponty states, “when considered as a palpitation of the eye, is only a remarkable variant of tactile palpitation” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968). Vision involves the same reversal as touch. We are never as visible as the objects that we see. Rather our vision opens us to the possibility of being seen, but this possibility is never the same as our seeing another. It is immanent and never realized in fact (Merleau-Ponty, 1968). He further argues, “I will never see my own retinas, but I still contain that those dull and secret membranes are at work at the bottom of my eyeballs” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968). From Merleau-Ponty’s point of view, one’s lack of complete visibility to himself is a condition for the possibility of the visibility of other things. Merleau-Ponty finds in the relation of seer to seen, and toucher to touched, a pattern which illuminates the requirements for there to be a seeing or touching being.

Flesh is the ultimate concept in Merleau-Ponty’s thought. It represents the complete overcoming of objectifying thinking. It is neither material nor spiritual, matter nor mind, fact nor mind. It lies beyond or behind all such dialectics. Merleau-Ponty tells us instead that flesh is an element in the sense of the “old term … that was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968). This notion of an element indicates the interior unity of all different beings. Thus, being a thing differentiates itself from the surrounding things. The fact that the body differentiates from other things means that it belongs more dynamically to the world rather than belonging to the world any less. Viewed from this perspective, flesh is an element of Being which gives a unity to all beings. Flesh enters into the composition of everything and makes everything be what it is. It allows everything that sees to see and be seen. It is the condition for the visibility of everything, in virtue of the fact that it is common to everything.

Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological descriptions have shown the subject to be an incarnate subjectivity, rather than a transcendental ego, the subjectivity of experience is the phenomenal body inseparably bound up with the world. It is obvious, therefore, that the unity of experience can no longer be considered to lie “out there” or “in here” but must, rather, originate in that dynamic relationship between body-subject and world through which objects and subjects come into being for us. The body unites two properties within itself.

Body and Architecture

1. Body: subject/object

The architectural tradition from Vitruvius, Alberti, Filarete, and Di Giorgio Martini to Le Corbusier (Vidler, 1990) can be characterized as anthropomorphic insofar as it consciously appeals to the human body as the standard of proportion and figure. The history of the body in architecture, from Vitruvius to the present, might in one sense be described as the progressive distancing of the body from the building, a gradual extension of the anthropomorphic analogy into wider and wider domains, leading insensibly but inexorably to the final
loss of the body as an authoritative foundation for architecture(Vidler, 1990), and showing the increased emphasis on embodied experience in architecture(Anderson, 2002). In terms of this Vidler describes three important stages of transformation: the building as body; the building epitomizing stages of the mind (of the body); and the environment as a whole as possessing organic characteristics. Perez-Gomez' argues that since the creation of order is the ultimate purpose of thinking and doing, it is relatively easy to identify order in history, which he called a fundamental dimension of systems, unable to accept the reality of specific phenomenon, thus the conceptual framework of the sciences is not compatible with reality. Therefore, modern sophisticated methodologies have been applied to design, failing to come to terms with the essential questions of meaning in architecture.

The building no longer simply represents the whole or a part of the body, but is seen as objectifying the various states of the body, physical and mental. The link between the body and architecture is not merely the superficial transmutation of physiological parts into building elements, i.e. using the mouth as a metaphor for an entry or dealing with windows as if they were eyes. Nor can it just be reduced to the use of bodily analogies to speak about building elements, as in the expression “the skin of a building”. It is, rather, the active engagement of the nature of our body, of a particular body image and its transformation into built form. The process of making and evaluating is no longer direct and physical, but is placed in the service of perception, only to be understood by a notion of empathy. Beginning with the Baroque era, Vidler (1990) notes that “architecture moves away from the point at which it can even be seen in terms of the human body …. Image, non-corporeal and atmospheric, has reflected defined plastic form.”

Frascari(1987) argues that in Scarpa’s architecture, the human figure is both the subject that produces that buildings sub specie corporis, and the object starting from which the building is made, and that the small things of the body and its habits constantly regulate Scarpa’s planning. Even in orthographic projection, the figures are integral and essential to the intentions being expressed(Anderson, 2002). The presence of figures(Fig.1) in drawings contribute much more than the simple illustration of scale and proportion.

2. Body in Scarpa’s work

At the entrance to Brion Cemetery, there is a concrete entry portico of enigmatic form(Fig. 2). The outer façade has a series of asymmetrical elements, such as a large opening in the wall to the left. The stepped moldings on the framing vertical sections both shift back in plan toward the left. Inside the space we find five steps up, with the three central steps shifted to the left(Fig.3). Just beyond the opening is a trough of water flowing from left to right(Fig.4). In looking through the opening, one notices a line of steel wires strung across the lawn to the right. All of these elements participate in a complex composition without obvious resolution. There is no single cause or source to explain the form and interrelationships between the singular shifts from the existing cemetery to Scarpa’s addition, although various reasons could be proposed for each.

Inside the entry of the Brion Cemetery, cut into the concrete wall are two intersecting circles(Fig.3), a motif Scarpa used obsessively in this design. This circular form takes on important symbolic, metaphorical, and structural significance, offering many levels of meaning, particularly in the context of a cemetery. The intersecting circles could suggest that they symbolize the union between husband and wife. The metal edged rings contain colored tiles of blue and pink, with each circle containing both colors, suggesting a hidden reversal of sexual qualities. The circles function as a window onto the cemetery garden; they signal the necessity to turn to the left or the right. Moreover, they suggest the duality of subject and object and that it is only in the interaction between the viewer and the thing perceived that meaning occurs.

There are two entrances to the cemetery, one directly from outside to the chapel, the other from the cemetery at the end of the main avenue(Los, 1994). The second access to the site is called a propylaeum, which means door in Greek, entrance. In the propylaeum, Scarpa interpreted a line of light in two ways, either as a ray of light which enters the space through an opening or as a line of vision emanating from the eyes. Light, for Scarpa a very characteristic feature of his designs, evolves into a language through which the possibility of discourse is...
enabled (Los, 1994). Openings in the roof (Fig. 5) admit light which diverges from the point at which it enters. In addition in his original plans and sections, a figure stands on the ground and looks out over the top of the wall, so that the horizon corresponds to the edge of the stepped molding and emanates upward from its eye at a 45 degree angle (Futagawa, 1988). These interpretations of lines become a passive reception of light and an active projection from one’s eye. At the propylaeum in a cemetery, two eyes determine the view:

The site was too large: it gave the feeling of a meadow. To justify the large area it seemed sensible to me to build a little temple for funeral services — burial — is such a terrible word. But the area was still too large, so we raised the ground level to be able to see outside. So one can look out but nothing can be seen from outside (Los, 1994).

The visualization which takes place at the propylaeum is in part metaphorical, for the line of sight materially effects the constructed result, determining the position and orientation. Scarpa indicates that the propylaeum responds directly to the postures and movements of the people who will occupy it (Anderson, 2002). Thinking with the body is merely another mode of inhabiting the world, and should be considered on equal footing with other modes of thought. Perception is neither a passive registration nor an active imposition of a meaning; it is “a living dialogue” between the body and things. Similarly, Henri Bergson argued that the objects which surround one’s body reflect its possible action upon them (Bergson, 1991). In light of this, our body image must be more than just a mirror reflection or an idealized mental picture of the perfect physique. It is an image, born in our perceptions, that we carry with us of what our body is, in all of its positions relative to our world.

Entrances (Fig. 5) form the point of connection from one realm to another. In this sense, they are critical in terms of defining the relationships between the two separate places. A wall divides spaces while a window or door provides points of connection between them, defining them. It is an ambiguity, where one is both inside and outside, and is therefore analogous to the central form of the intersecting circles, each of which represents irreconcilable opposites. In relation to subject and object, a viewer imposes his wishes upon an object regardless of its inherent properties.

Alternatively, an object may force itself upon a viewer, forcing itself into his consciousness. The first case appears when we begin to interpret something, we read into a form what we wish to see, based upon our preconceptions and prejudices. The second example occurs when we contentedly go along thinking everything is fine until the “hard facts” of reality hit us. Somewhere between these limits, meaning and understanding occur. This meshing of a subject’s memories, experiences, and preconceptions with an object’s qualities and form result in the interpretive experience, a combination of the universal and the particular. The use of the intersecting circles provides a possible interpretation of this form: as a representation of this dialectic between inside and outside.

The early design of the tomb depicts the Brion couple standing beside their sarcophagi (Fig. 6). The moldings on the sarcophagi point alternately upward and downward suggesting that the difference between up and down is gendered: hers, as a cup overturned, and his, as a cup filled. While the sarcophagi themselves also appear as cradles, suggesting notions of rebirth, the entire construction is sunken into the ground, focusing on the merger of the dead bodies with the earth. While this merger results in the body’s return to the status of inert matter, a spring arises from the area in front of the tomb, at a higher level. The final version of the arcosolium (Fig. 7), a Latin term which means a small arch, depicts the sarcophagi as they were constructed, tilted toward each other. Scarpa sees this monument as embodying an image of the reconciliation of opposites: male and female, earth and sky, and life and death.

Fig.7. Arcosolium, Brion Cemetery  
Fig.8. Plan, Brion Cemetery

The tomb which faces both the meditation pavilion and the chapel is situated at the corner of the two arms which compose Scarpa’s addition to the existing cemetery, rotated at a 45 degree angle (Fig. 8). The relation between the pavilion and the tomb appear to be based upon a notion of vision as symbolic of rebirth and regeneration. The temporal aspect of these positions suggest that one is looking into the future, toward death, from the pavilion, a place of fertility and birth. The line of communication between the tomb and the pavilion runs parallel to the interior façade of the propylaeum. The intersecting circles at the entry show this relationship between the moment of conception and the finality of burial. Thus the cyclical flow back and forth between these poles is intended to mirror the interpenetration of subject and object which is necessary for perception and cognition as well as to show the importance of the line of sight in achieving this interaction. Finally, distinctions between inside and outside, subject and object, and male and female, are shown to be reversed, effaced and merged into the Brion cemetery.

3. The body generating meaning

The body directly influences the production of architecture. When we set out to create an architectural
artifact, our body stands between the idea within us and its realization in the world. In a sense, the body acts like a kind of filter influencing the final form of the object by projecting its own nature into it. This transference animates the object by allowing us to inhabit it, and at the same time formalizes a tangible reminder of the elusive essence of our being. Scarry says "the now freestanding made object is a projection of the live body that it now reciprocates the live body" (Scarry, 1985). She explains the body in terms of the need to diminish the inanimateness of the external world, by projecting a generalized sense or awareness of aliveness on to objects.

Every artifact begins as a non-sentient idea within the body’s interior. The body then turns inside out in the process of birthing the idea as a perceptible form in the world. From its conception, the idea is imbued with the same nature as the body which created it. The artifact is a fragment or reiteration of the body.

The body as a metaphor of the fragmented architectural body is the explosion, the fragmented unconscious, where the “architectural body” does not reflect the body of the subject, but instead reflects the perception of the fragmented body as the built text, a set of fragments of languages and texts, the city. (Agrest, 1991)

The transference of the embodied nature onto artifacts is evident in varying degrees, depending on the type of object. In the case of architecture, the body’s role is real, albeit rather abstract. Practically, the architect may focus on a particular aspect of the body image to influence his design, but the complete edifice speaks to the nature of being as whole. Although the analogy between buildings and the body had lost its force in modern architecture, it has remained entrenched in everyday speech.

The way in which the body establishes its relation with the world is what determines part of the perceptual field to count as the background and another part to count as a moving object (Scarry, 1985). Along with this, the sense of loss of the body, which began under the influence of Kant and German Romantics, intensifies. The body becomes an object of nostalgia, and an image emerges of the body irreconcilably fragmented, morsellated, and fetishized. Works using this concept in art and of the body becomes an object of nostalgia, and an image emerges of the body irreconcilably fragmented, morsellated, and fetishized. Works using this concept in art and of the body becomes an object of nostalgia, and an image emerges of the body irreconcilably fragmented, morsellated, and fetishized. Works using this concept in art and

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The violation of architectural space seems to be produced by the disruptive action of the body. Bodies which, through their movement, not only react to conditioning but also generate dynamic space (Tshumi, 1981). The means of intrusion of one order into the established architectural order can be translated into form. Thus fragmentation infers the reduction of a theory or object to a set of particular formal elements. Combination, in turn, implies the interrelationship of those formal elements which may be conflicting (oppose), reciprocating (reinforce), or indifferent (neutral) in their juxtaposition (construction) (Tshumi, 1983). The combination is not only the sum of its individual elements, it is the unification of the elements into a new whole. Through this compositional unification, empirically dissimilar images are linked together synthetically to produce metaphors. These metaphors suggest a new meaning, which is different from and greater than the individual elements alone.

4. The body towards architectural theory

Autonomous and superimposed systems can produce a multiplicity of impressions, and thus objects refer to other objects, always postponing ultimate meaning. By superimposing multiple fragments of several different forms, one may intentionally efface an explicitly meaningful form and produce a nebulous form whose meaning is ambiguous. From this point of view, architecture is understood not as a stable object, as in the anthropomorphic tradition of architecture, but as a process of transgressive activity. Norberg-Schultz argues for figurative architecture as opposed to abstract or nonfigurative architecture because it provides a basic reference to reality. This figural characteristic is accomplished through the definition, confinement and articulation of space, space viewed not in the abstract but as a real and tangible entity whose properties can be manipulated to achieve specific purposes.

Traditionally, the symbolist tradition supports that the secret of architecture exists in its symbolic mode, and thus it has extrinsic meaning. Since it was believed that architecture was communicative, each building must have its own character and message, which is a rather intelligible concept. Hence design methods often incorporated specific proportional relations between built elements and the inhabitant, such as the use of classical orders, or they employed depictions of figures, animals, and plants, creating a sense of empathy. Today, we must pay close attention to the impact of our design upon people—physically, visually, functionally, and experientially. Scarpa in the Brion Cemetery interpreted the form and movement of the human body in a culturally constructed area. His drawings and designs investigate the spatial relationships of objects, changes in elevation, and in particular how the body/ mind of a participant/observer might experience these spaces.
Phenomenologically, perception is close to the efficacious similarity between the body and things in the world. The actual subject of perception is the anonymous body which is inseparably tied to the world. Thus, since a person is the actualization of the visibility of the world and a person belongs to the world, he is able to perceive. To perceive is to let things inscribe upon the body and give it their resemblance. At present, the body becomes the very condition necessary for the coming into being of a meaningful world. In this sense, meaning is nothing but the encounter between one’s body and what is.

This phenomenological body allows one to inhabit the world. Understanding the body’s way of inhabiting the world is a way of transcending pure materiality, passive thingness. It is the pre-reflective experience of the body as a power of action which enables one to transcend the given and structure one’s world in accordance with personal plans, or to lend one’s body to the realm of the imagination. Something begins to exist precisely to the extent that the body is a power of transcendence towards it (Langer, 1989). Therefore, every action that brings the body into the world produces meaning.

The Brion Cemetery is not about the body-as-object or the body-as-other; it is about how our bodies, not simply as sensing organs or viewing devices, but as sentient beings, fully engage in culturally specific constructs, vegetal and mineral, landscape and building (Dodds, 2002). By relating the objects he designs to the subjects viewing them, the cemetery takes the form of an analogy, a formal reference, a visual or physical relationship. Thus the procedures of Scarpa’s design works develops from an attempt to understand how human beings meaningfully inhabit the world (Anderson, 2002). Further discussing the lived world, Merleau-Ponty (1962) proposes that:

The primordial constituents of the lived world are not objective properties, but situations. Situations are as much part of the subject as they are part of the world; they always have both a subject side and an object side which are inextricably linked to each other.

The fundamental nature of meaning is mainly related to creativity. Current authentic expression in architecture is a creative act, that is, the act of giving birth to meaning. The communicative aspect of meaning in anthropomorphic tradition from Vitruvius to Le Corbusier is derivative of its inner life, which resides in creativity. In relation to contemporary relationships between body and architectural theory, the view of architectural meaning as produced rather than transmitted has been suggested by Venturi and Eisenman.

In Scarpa’s works, he manipulated his material and form until they began to resonate with the memories in the mind of the viewer. These memories developed from the proximal effects of the experience of moving through a building, as well as images of long forgotten experiences of forms and of the formless. In this sense, forms begin to come alive, as aesthetic objects, simultaneously imposing themselves upon the viewer, but also opening up the possibility for multiple interpretations. Based on this view, Scarpa’s approach can be characterized as empirical, and meaning is produced as one moves through the space or building.

Conclusion

Scarry claims that man is not an animal plus some higher faculty (reason) but an animal whose behavior can be understood only if we take into account his capacity to think about the world by means of language. Language itself, as gesture, speech, or writing, is part of the physical world, but it would be absurd to try to account for its occurrence using the laws of physics; it can be understood only as the expression of what it expresses. But this is not to say that what it expresses could be thought independently of the expression. Thought cannot be without language, and yet language is a phenomenon which can be accounted for and predicted only by reference to thought. Scarry’s analysis of the “un-making” of the world via torture is the most “radical” deconstruction of the civilized form (Scarry, 1985). Artifact is simply one attribute among “in all probability hundreds” of attributes of the “undeconstructed civilized form” (Scarry, 1985). Thus Scarry’s analysis of torture implicitly illustrates the deconstruction of “artifact”.

The imagination moves in with the innate ability to colonize disparate fragments, of sensation, information, and institution. In collaboration with the heart and intellect, it links and transforms these into a new order which might appear in the world as a story or new theory of cosmology or a DNA replicator, or a built environment in a city. Aldo Rossi (1982) argues,

The city in its growth is defined by its artifacts, leaving open many possibilities and containing unexplored potential. This has nothing to do with the concept of open form or open work; rather it suggests the idea of interrupted work.

The modern view of body as a rational whole and whose proportioned unity implies an ironically incorporated body, is not a compelling body image today. Merleau-Ponty attempts to develop his nondualistic conception of the mind-body relationship not just in terms of a notion of animate nature which shows a certain form of explanation of behavior to be appropriate, but also in terms of the subject in the world. Merleau-Ponty’s concept of “flesh” is one among similarly compelling conceptions of body that challenge the traditional dichotomies (e.g. mind and body, biology and psychology, material and immaterial) of modern dualism. Thus his work is an attempt to delineate the way in which our body and our surroundings are present to us as we go about our commerce with the world, before we have developed some secondary theory about the way they should appear. The way in which the body establishes its relation with the world is what determines
part of the perceptual field to count as the background and another part to count as a moving object.

In relation to the body subject’s knowledge of the world, Scarpa’s works show that the boundary between the body and architecture is blurred in many of his works where either the scale figures take on mechanical, architectonic characteristics or the built forms have figural, human qualities. These attempts aim at overcoming the existential abyss which lies between an individual and the objects which compose his world. Scarpa is intent on making a clear formal connection between these realms, and his method of relating them has some potential implications with regard to the effects and significance of architectural form for the human habitant. These include the breakdown of a strict division between the living human presence and the inert passive object.

Scarpa made use of a number of different approaches to the relationship between the human figure and architectural form. While he uses a variety of approaches, there is a strong connection between the objects he designs and the subjects viewing them. Based upon vision and experience through color, line, reflection, shadow and touch, a method of architectural signification is achieved. In the Brion Cemetery, the visitor’s apprehension involves both the construction of specific views and the absence of others; it engages both a conceptual body and the physical body of the visitor (Dodds, 2002). Thus Scarpa tried to show the body and its physical and psychic relationship with the forms with which it comes into contact in terms of all the senses. To him, the notion of architectural meaning is not based so much upon memory and conventions, but upon the physicality of the experience, in a phenomenological sense. His work is based upon both of the physical and mental methods of understanding architecture, but with an emphasis on physicality.

Merleau-Ponty defined Scarpa’s body-subject’s knowledge of the world philosophically. For him, bodies are lived experiences. This conception of the body undermines the dichotomies of Western philosophies of reason/emotion and mind/body which lead to the illusion of the fragmented body. According to Merleau-Ponty, the act of perception is neither the passive registration nor the active imposition of meaning; it is a living dialogue between the body and things. Thus reality is the lived world of immediate embodied experience. The body-subject’s lived experience is necessarily one of location because its language is that of gestures, movements, and actions. Body-subjects are always, in an important sense, place constructed in the same way that all knowledges and everything in the world are so constructed (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). All existence arises from the specificities of place and all environments have body-subjects who are, at different times, in different cultures, related to them.

The idea of the body as a perceptual locus implies that the way an individual perceives the world is very much different from anyone else’s. All the possible extensions of my body image are perceptible things which have meaning within society, and as such, add to or modify my body image. At present, the body image is, therefore, a highly personal construction representing a world born in the perceptions of the individual.

Endnotes
1 Perez-Gomez (1983) traces the evolution of architectural theory, the concepts of number and measure, from the 17th to the early 19th century in light of contemporary advances in scientific thought. Before Galileo, architects conceived of number and measures as elements in a symbolic language of form imbued with transcendental meanings. Scientific thought, in contrast, dealt with degrees of specificity incompatible with metaphysical concerns; For information on this issue, J. Habermas (1971), Toward a Rational Society; T. Roszak (1973), Where the Wasteland Ends; and J. Rylkovert (1980), The First Moderns.
2 Others who challenge these dichotomies include Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Irigaray, Butler and most recently, work by feminists such as Moira Gatena and Elizabeth Grosz.

References