



**Living Landscapes - Landscapes for living  
Paesaggi Abitati  
Conference Proceedings  
Florence, February-June 2012**

Planum. The Journal of Urbanism, n. 27, vol.2/2013  
www.planum.net | ISSN 1723-0993  
Proceedings published in October 2013

## **Body, Architecture, and City**

**Giancarlo Paba**

Department of Architecture, University of Florence (Italy)  
giancarlo.paba@unifi.it

---

In this paper some relationships between body, architecture, and the city are analyzed. The body is historically a reference for the measurements of architectural and urban space, from Vitruvian man to Le Corbusier's modulator. The author thinks that all plural and different bodies, human and non-human, should be the reference for planning, regardless of gender, race, proportions, abilities, and lifestyle characters.

The history of architecture and city is closely linked to the history of the body. The idea that the human body is the reference for the organization of space, from pillar to house, building to city, garden to territory, has measured human history in different ways over time and space (sometimes the animal body is also a term of comparison, for the turtle-shaped fortress of Sassocorvaro, for example, or for the Government of Sudan's recent city plans with the neighbourhoods in the shape of a rhinoceros).

The examples could be endless, from the drawings of Francesco di Giorgio Martini to the anthropomorphic Upper Volta houses, the Dogon village map in Mali (as reconstructed by Ogotemmel for Marcel Griaule) to the studies of Oskar Schlemmer, up to the thousands of organic and bodily metaphors that have populated the history of architecture and planning. Even in modern urbanism, references to the body, and medical and health analogies in general, are frequent. Bartram and Shobrook claim that the "1940s vision of urban Britain was refracted through the form and content of medical imagery and rhetoric" (Bartram & Shobrook, 2001, p. 119). The holistic vision of anatomy and physiology provided a reference model for the ideas of comprehensive planning. The plan of Plymouth in 1943, for example, designed by Patrick Abercrombie, is built around a bodily idea of the city. The bombing had wounded the urban organism and healing the city centre would allow, according Abercrombie, the creation of a "virile Regional capital" (cited in Bartram & Shobrook, 2001, p. 130). The center is likened to the heart, the traffic flows through arteries, and the map of Plymouth "reveals the city centre as if lying prostrate on a surgeon's table, stretched from limb to limb" (ibidem). Sometimes, and in recent times more and more frequently, the organic metaphor is used in the negative. Eliel Saarinen, for example, in *The City*, didactically used two images: the first is that of a healthy tissue, meaning an organized and functioning city; the second is rather a diseased tissue, ravaged by tumour cells:

"decline and death enter [...] no matter whether it happens in the microscopic tissues of cell-structure where cancer causes disintegration, or in the hearts of the large cities of today where compactness and confusion cause slums to spread" (Saarinen, 1943, p. 15).

Both male and female bodies are related to space (although much more often the former): the building materials, architectural monuments, city and metropolis are often linked to the male body, while the home, garden, landscape and agricultural land are more frequently connected to the female body (Akkerman, 2006). There is, however, also a hermaphrodite body in the history of architecture, and it is an interesting and paradigmatic case: at the 1929 *Russische Ausstellung* in Zurich, as the title says, an exhibition of Russian architecture, there was a poster by El Lissitzky representing the faces of a girl and a boy merged together with three eyes instead of four (the central eye belonging to both sides), as an icon of a new hermaphrodite humanity that would overcome all forms of exploitation and create perfect equality. An idea of equality based on eliminating differences that today contradicts a vision of the city founded, on the contrary, on the promotion of diversity and opportunities of realization that need to be offered to the multiplicity of both human and non-human urban bodies (Paba, 2010; Perrone, 2010; Paba & Perrone, 2011).

In contemporary art, the relationship between body, home and city has played a major role, particularly in the works of women: for example, in the *femme-maison* of Louise Bourgeois or the walking houses of Laurie Simmons. And then in Claude Cahun who depicted her body in the interior of a house or even inside a piece of furniture, or Cindy Sherman who photographs herself to describe the different metropolitan landscapes, or Edward Hopper who portrayed women's bodies in houses or hotel rooms, to explain the atmosphere and furnishings styles, or Valie Export who uses her body as a kind of walking modulator to measure urban spaces, or Gabriele Basilico who, in the series called *Contact 1984*, compares the different textures and materials of chairs through the tracks left on a woman's buttocks.

The reference to the human body as an inspiration for architecture is still alive today, as in the case of Calatrava's *Turning Torso* – the name of the HSB skyscraper in Malmö – which is a translation of an architectural sculpture by the same Calatrava, the *Twisting Torso*: in this case the movement of the human body (male once again) inspires the dynamic torsion of the building. And while Claude-Nicolas Ledoux concealed



a phallic reference in the plan of a building (the 1789 *Maison du plaisir*, called *Oikema*), Jean Nouvel and Norman Foster show it explicitly, unashamedly, in the *Agbar* tower in Barcelona and the *Swiss Re* tower in London. Lastly, there are two books in particular I deem important to mention in the relationship between body and architecture. The first is *The Dancing Column* by Joseph Rykwert, in which the infinite variations of architectural canons are analyzed in relation to the bodies of men and male and female gods (the Ionic columns), and even masks, horns, eyes, skin and bones, girls and boys, and metaphoric animals, in a long journey through the centuries and cultural traditions (Rykwert, 1996).

The second book is *Flesh and Stone* by Richard Sennett, which reconstructs a historical genealogy of the relationship between the body, or rather flesh, and cities. In particular, Sennett directly relates nudity of architecture with nakedness of the body, especially in the Greek civilization. In a chapter entitled *Nakedness*, Sennett recalls the close link between the (male) body, democracy and the city in the Athens of Pericles:

“To the ancient Athenian, displaying oneself affirmed one’s dignity as a citizen. Athenian democracy placed great emphasis on its citizens exposing their thoughts to others, just as men exposed their bodies. These mutual acts of disclosure were meant to draw the knot between citizens ever tighter. We might call the knot today “male bonding”; the Athenians took this bond literally. In ancient Greek, the very words used to express erotic love of another man could be used to express one’s attachment to the city. A politician wanted to appear like a lover or a warrior.” (Sennett, 1994, p. 33).

The exposure of the naked body (predominantly male) “puts its stamp on the stones of Athens”, and the city proudly displays the corresponding nudity of architecture: “Perikles celebrated an Athens in which harmony seemed to reign between flesh and stone” (Sennett, 1994, p. 33). I will now consider five naked bodies that are important for architecture and the city. It is little more than a pretext, almost just a logical thread in order to carry through the reasoning, developing on some of my previous work (Paba, 2010).

The first two images are very famous: the *Vitruvian Man* by Leonardo da Vinci (you can see it on the one-euro coin) and the *Modulor* by Le Corbusier (I’d suggest going to look at one of the many preliminary drawings, in which it appears precisely as a sexed male body). If architecture and the city are man-made, not as a human product in general, but as artefacts designed following the measurements of the male body, these are the two pictures that it is normal, perhaps even banal, to look at. Leonardo’s drawing, endlessly analysed and reproduced, deserves some further consideration. Leonardo has translated into an image the Vitruvian description of the ideal proportions of the human body, taken as a measure of architecture (and all things). Malvina Borgherini analysed his mode of transposition and the conclusion is simple: Leonardo did not respect the measures contained in the *Treaty of Vitruvius*. In particular Vitruvius wrote that the ratio of the head (measured from the base of the neck to the hairline) to the height of the man should be a quarter, and in Leonardo’s drawing, this ratio is instead one:six. The reason for this betrayal is understandable if you look at the digital elaboration reproduced in Borgherini’s article: if Leonardo had respected the proportions given by Vitruvius, the ideal man would have been extremely macrocephalic, almost a freak (Borgherini, 2009, pp. 70-71). Leonardo was inspired, therefore, by his knowledge of real man, aided by the ability of the design to keep the thought anchored to reality. You can say, paradoxically, that Leonardo’s *Vitruvian* picture tells us that ideal man – perfect and exactly proportioned – does not really exist. Maybe you can say that the importance of the *Vitruvian Man* by Leonardo da Vinci has been overemphasized, while the thousands of drawings and sketches by Leonardo showed his interest in the real bodies of women and men, full of defects and deformities, sick, “ugly”, truly real. The literature on the *Modulor* by Le Corbusier is endless too, and not much more can be added. It is certainly a male body (even though there is a female version, see Harper, 2011), and Le Corbusier himself is explicit in this regard. So he wrote in a letter of 1913:

“The naked man for me is the man who has surmounted himself ... a complex of firm and rectangular planes. The naked man for me is architecture. When I no longer make architecture, I see everything as women” (cit. in Hooper 2002).

It is not possible to deny that the Modulor was one of the elements of a paradigmatic, let us say “masculine” vision of architecture, in which proportions and human needs appear abstract, uniform and standardized. A concept that created a canon, reproduced in architecture manuals. Lance Hosey, in this regard, analyzed the architectural graphic standards handbooks in the U.S., coming to the conclusion that the body of reference in anthropometric diagrams, predominantly male and white, is characterized in terms of gender and race (Hosey 2001). In fact, things are a bit more nuanced in this case too. In the recently been republished materials from the conference *The Divine Proportion*, organized by the “Triennale di Milano” in 1951 (Cimoli & Irace, 2007), the speech by Le Corbusier concerns precisely the Modulor and it is very interesting. In his long paper, the Modulor becomes a flexible, friendly, domestic tool. In the speech and drawings there are certainly the standard sizes, the Fibonacci series, the system of Chinese boxes that allow us to measure and design the world so exactly, in a mathematical and inexorable way, but these aspects are presented with some understatement. “I will speak as a craftsman”, so begins the speech of Corbu: the Modulor is a simple tool, useful and imperfect like a radio, which “has its fading, its noise, its not so well-defined waves”.

I would, therefore, like to take this simple, craftsman Le Corbusier seriously, and remember another naked man picture by Le Corbusier, not of the Modulor, however, but his own naked body. You can see it on page 179 of the book *The Sex and Architecture*, in the essay by Beatriz Colomina (Colomina, 1996). Colomina is an important historian of architecture at Princeton University who has an original, unconventional and competent approach.

Before returning to Le Corbusier’s naked body, I would like to quote another paper by Colomina, because its subject is linked to some issues addressed below. It is the essay *Collaborations: The Private Life of Modern Architecture*, in which Colomina reconstructs the role that some women (partners, co-workers, wives, lovers) have had in the work of the greatest architects of the modern movement: Lilly Reich and Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier and Charlotte Perriand, Anne Tyng and Louis Kahn, Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Margaret McDonald, Ray and Charles Eames, Alison and Peter Smithson, Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi and many other pairs at work and often in life too, to which I would add, in the world of planning, Anna Morton, Norah Geddes, Jaqueline Tyrwhitt, Edith Elmer Wood and Catherine Bauer in the environment dominated by the figures of Patrick Geddes and Lewis Mumford.

These are often stories of clandestine work, neglected skills, sometimes stories of subjugation and psychological violence, but Colomina highlights another important aspect of these collaborations: she emphasizes the interactive nature of the work of design and architecture understood as common work. In addition, common working can be especially productive when men and women are put together, precisely because of their diversity: men and women intended almost like different species, companion species (in the words of Donna Haraway, 2008) whose differences, in collaboration, can give professional performances a particular physical and mental agility, so as to overcome the obstacles of a difficult job and gain a completeness that, alone, would be unattainable.

Let’s go back to Le Corbusier. The picture appears in an essay by Colomina devoted to the holiday home designed by Eileen Gray, built in 1926-29 on the rocks of Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, between Nice and Menton. The house is a misunderstood masterpiece of rationalist architecture, and before I talk about that picture of Le Corbusier’s naked body, I just want to focus my attention on this villa, integrating the considerations of Colomina with the analysis of Caroline Constant and Jasmine Rault. Constant talks about a “non-heroic modernism”, a kind of tempered rationalism. The house is in fact built from the inside, starting from the concrete needs of life, and the body:

“Gray rendered the subject an active agent in her environment, forcefully shaping the space to receive her, more a participant than a mere occupant. [...] She engaged all of the senses to entrance the occupant’s consciousness of bodily immersion in a sequence of experiences”

(Constant, 2003, pp. 93-126).



But the account given by Colomina, Constant and Rault focuses on the history of symbolic and material violence, which Le Corbusier practiced against Gray and his home. It is a siege that took place in several stages, as though Le Corbusier would have liked to erase the originality of the architecture: the construction of another house on the surrounding land, the construction of the Cabanon and especially the decision of the owner (and co-designer) Jean Badovici, friend and partner of Gray, to allow Le Corbusier to paint murals on eight/nine of the villa's walls. Eileen Gray, who was against the intervention, felt the act of Le Corbusier to be a symbolic rape – a kind of invasion and occupation of the house – and a material rape too, because Le Corbusier's pictures contrasted sharply with her architectural vision that only the white walls could show. Colomina reconstructs other important aspects of the story, which I must postpone because my purpose herein is more limited. The photo shows Le Corbusier while painting the walls of Gray's house: it is the body of a man of fifty, naked, with the signs of life lived, some heaviness, thick glasses. He does not have the complexion of the paradigmatic modulator, and his right leg reveals a long and terrible scar, resulting from the impact with a boat at sea. The relationship of Le Corbusier with those places (house, terraces, rocks, sea) would remain very strong. He would often return to those places and die in the waters there, in 1965, from a heart attack that surprised him during his habitual swim.

Next to the house, as a further seizure of the territory, Le Corbusier built the Cabanon, a simple shed, small in size (3.66 by 3.66 meters), but as accurate and complete as the most studied of architecture. Le Corbusier built a home-nest around his person, yes geometric and rational, but with the same idea of condensing all that is necessary to life around the body. The Gray villa and Le Corbusier's Cabanon are both a kind of body-home, at the same time domestic and rational, sensitive and accurate.

Yet to me that photo of Le Corbusier, naked while painting the walls, seems important: this image of the Corbu's lived-in body, not the Modulator, is the body to which reference should be made for an idea of planning that is sensitive to differences, to the different stories of men and women, boys and girls, young and old.

The second naked body is that of Friedrich Stowasser, known by the pseudonym of Hundertwasser, artist and bio-architect. In this case it is not a drawing, but precisely his unclothed body photographed during two performances that were held in Munich and Vienna in 1967/1968. On these two occasions Hundertwasser pronounced the famous 'naked speech' against rationalism in architecture, against the denudation of architecture operated by the functionalist canons. The alternative proposed by Hundertwasser is expressed in the theory of five skins, from the body to the cosmos, we can say. The first skin is naturally the epidermis that surrounds our body, the first house we live in; the clothes are the second skin, considered as extensions of the body (and Hundertwasser also designed clothes and shoes suitable for the health of the body); the third skin is the house, and in the Munich and Vienna speeches "the first skin was laid bare to better proclaim the right to the third", the right to a home no longer stripped of all ornament, a living house, directly transformed by the inhabitants; the fourth skin is called identity and is the place in which families and homes are contained (the neighborhood, the city), while the fifth skin is the earth, the environment, and nature, the ecological frame in which we live.

I'm not a true lover of Hundertwasser's projects, and sometimes I remain perplexed by some of his architectures which seem too programmatically colorful and childish (and, moreover, the architecture without unnecessary ornaments of Loos, for example, belongs to my personal pantheon), but today his message calls for renewed consideration. In those old performances and manifestos there emerge some relevant and still current themes: the manifestos on the "Right to Window" and on "The Tree Tenant" indicate the possibility for people to transform their own home and fill it with greenery and trees, the house of Hundertwasser being conceived as a natural and vegetal machine; the manifestos on the Humus Toilet and on The Sacred Shit pose the problem of waste recycling and propose a more general idea of our relationship with the environment (the fifth skin): "Shit is our soul [...]. The fragrance of humus is holy and closer to God than that of frankincense. [...] The smell of humus is the smell of God, the resurrection of smell, the

smell of immortality” (from *The Sacred Shit*, cit. in Restany 2001, p. 30). Many contemporary experiences of green building and bio-planning have a forerunner in Hundertwasser. It is important to note the use of the body as a means of disseminating ideas and projects, from the mentioned “naked speeches” to the environmental body art (for example, trees planted in the windows and streets of Milan in 1973), and the demonstration of how easy it is to use and transport the humus toilet (you can see Hundertwasser sitting down, barefoot, almost in action, on the special toilet seat structure (Restany, 2001, p. 79).

The third image is from a book by David Crouch, *The Art of Allotments*, page 21 (Crouch, 2007). It is a work of Justine Kurland, a New York-based photographer who has investigated the relationships between bodies and landscapes. In some studies (reproduced in the book *Of Woman Born*) Kurland has created images of women’s naked bodies (and even those of children and families) in many parts of the United States, especially in national parks, beaches, camps, itinerant settlements and alternative communities.

The photo in Crouch’s book portrays a group of women who grow a vegetable garden: naked bodies, normal, quiet, ordinary. This is not anything exceptional and indeed there are many groups that combine agriculture and nudism, gardening and the naturalness of individual and social behaviour – Naked Gardening is also a movement, with often very commercial implications (I & B Pollard, 2007). David Crouch and Colin Ward have conducted many surveys on people’s self-organization to build a shelter, a home, or to cultivate a piece of land, for example in the small classic book *Cotters and Squatters: The Hidden History of Housing* (Crouch & Ward, 1997), in which they try to demonstrate that in human history, those who do not have a home try to obtain it by any means, often realizing it with their own hands. It is right, lawful to take the piece of the world which people need to live.

Interplay between body, agriculture and landscape is of particular interest here. From these reports, experiments and innovations come into being in the cities and in the countryside, from community gardening to educational farms, from Alzheimer gardens to the therapeutic use of nature and landscape, from school gardening practices to self-managed urban reforestation. This is not something new in the history of planning: I like to occasionally look at the pictures that show the group of women and children reorganizing with their own hands Ramsay Garden and Johnston Terrace in the neighbourhood of Edinburgh renovated under the supervision of Patrick Geddes, or the images of the small community that autonomously manages the interior spaces of the blocks on Sunnyside Gardens, where Lewis Mumford once lived, designed by Stein and Wright, in the outskirts of New York. This renewed relationship between body and land (nature, agriculture and landscape) has changed in recent years on the basis of gender differences. Women have played an important role in the history of agriculture (and they still have an important role in less developed countries), but in the industrialized agricultural systems of Western countries the employment of women has declined sharply in the last decades and urban horticulture was a predominantly male activity too. Today we are seeing a reversal of this trend, with a growth in female horticulture, partly due to the economic crisis, but also due to the role that women play in social relationships, as a link between production and reproduction, and between production and consumption.

The awareness of the relationship between body and agriculture, and nutrition and health, as well as attention to quality mean that women are the protagonists of the experiences of alternative agriculture and critical consumption, from organic farming groups to joint purchasing, from social farms to the promotion of educational and psychological therapeutic gardening activities. Susan Buckingham, with reference to the London area, talks about a regen(d)eration in the self-production of food, as a process of regeneration of proximity agriculture and change in farming practices driven by women: less use of fertilizers, careful choice of crops and seeds, questioning of the traditional food culture, and not least also a more sensitive eye to aesthetics in the arrangement and management of cultivated fields (Buckingham, 2005).

## References

- Akkerman A. (2006) *Femminility and Masculinity in City-Form: Philosophical Urbanism as a History of Consciousness*. Human Studies, 29 (2), 229-256.
- Borgherini M. (2009) “*La linea che distingue la figura delli corpi e lor particule*”: note sul disegno dell’Uomo vitruviano di Leonardo, in Perissa Torrini A., ed., Leonardo. L’uomo vitruviano fra arte e scienza. Venezia, Marsilio.
- Buckingham S. (2005) *Women (Re)construct the Plot: The Regen(d)eration of Urban Food Growing*, Area, 37 (2), 171-179.
- Cimoli A.C., Irace F., eds., (2007) *La divina proporzione*. Triennale 1951. Milano, Electa.
- Beatriz Colomina (1996) *Battle Line: E. 1029*. In Agrest D., Con way P., Weisman L.K., eds. *The Sex of Architecture*. New York, Abrams.
- Colomina B. (1999) *Collaborations: The Private Life of Modern Architecture*. The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, 58 (3), 462-471.
- Constant C. (2007) *Eileen Gray*. London, Phaidon.
- Crouch D. (2003) *The Art of Allotments: Culture and Cultivation*. Nottingham, Five Leaves.
- Crouch D., Ward C. (1997) *Cotters and Squatters: The Hidden History of Housing*. Nottingham, Five Leaves.
- Dodds G., Tavernor R., eds., (2005) *Body and Building: Essays in the Changing Relation of Body and Architecture*. Cambridge, MIT Press.
- Haraway D.J. (2008) *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis. University of Minnesota Press.
- Harper P. (2011) *Le Corbusier & Women; The Feminist Voyeur?* Available on <http://www.laprospettiva.eu/568/>
- Hooper B. (2002) *Urban Space, Modernity, and Masculinist Desire*. In Bingaman A., Sanders L., Zorach R., eds. *Embodied Utopias: Gender, Social Change, and the Modern Metropolis*. London/New York, Routledge.
- Hosey L. (2001) *Hidden Lines: Gender, Race, and the Body in Graphic Standards*. Journal of Architectural Education, 55 (2), 101-112.
- Paba G. (2010) *Corpi urbani. Differenze, interazioni, politiche*. Milano, FrancoAngeli.
- Paba G., Perrone (2011). *Words, Bodies, Things. Planning Theory & Research*, 12 (29), 307-309.
- Perrone P. (2010) *DiverCity. Conoscenza, pianificazione, città delle differenze*. Milano, FrancoAngeli.
- Pollard I & B (2007) *The Naked Gardeners: Abbey House Gardens*. London, Papadakis.
- Rault J. (2011) *Eileen Gray and the Design of Sapphic Modernity: Staying in*. London, Ashgate.
- Restany P. (2001) *Hundertwasser: The Painter-King with the Five Skins*. Köln, Taschen.
- Rykwert J. (1996) *The Dancing Column: On Order in Architecture*. Cambridge, MIT Press.
- Saarinen E. (1943) *The City: Its Growth, Its Decay, Its Future*. New York, Reinhold.
- Sennett R. (1996). *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization*. New York, Norton & Company.