





# 12.08.2002

## Surface Consciousness

In search of the plasma membrane. Michael Trudgeon

---

“The footprints in the sand, the thin furrow drawn with the stick, are already steps toward the continuous representation of the boundary. When the wind erases them, when the rain washes them away, the step is taken to a permanent demarcation through a row of field stones, a hedge, or a fence.”<sup>1</sup>

The act of design or architectural intervention is the drawing of a line in the sand. Territories are created by such gestures on either side of that line. Their significance may be perceptual, proprietorial, social or organisational, demarcating significant differences. How that line is understood, elaborated on, processed, expanded and celebrated becomes part of the momentum of the social context or event space that also creates the impetus for such actions and sustains them.

For Raymond Lowey and the ‘skin doctors’ of early American industrial design the boundary or surface was an expression of efficiency and optimism. It presented a slippery simplicity, obfuscating the complex internal uncertainties of the mechanical within. This opaqueness stands in strong contrast to the contemporary trend to expose and dramatize these processes through the use of transparent and translucent skins. While adding nothing to the users understanding of the machine this dramatisation can be engaging and diverting. The notion of the surface as a fixed skin, a stable and opaque signifier by which the viewer recognises and knows the entity or object has given us the model of the classical body. Communication technology, medical imaging techniques, remote sensing and computer enhanced visualisations give us the extended body, the body as data set, the enhanced body, the virtual body, the immersed body and the lost body. This transformation and augmentation in identifying and specifying objects, buildings and spaces has fuelled the pursuit of process driven indeterminate boundaries and surfaces.

For the architect Cedric Price the idea of a building is pursued and understood as a system of environmental control rather than as an enclosure or legible envelope. The building or boundary is seen as performative, designed to catalyse and accommodate change.<sup>2</sup> The meaning or content of the space is expressed through transaction, the process of information exchange. Here the building is significant as a generator or filter. The surfaces are not passive markers but dynamic fields that mediate or stimulate the flow of information, inviting experience.

Jeremy Rifkin, in *The Age of Access* identifies the rise of the experience economy and a world informed by contingency and indeterminacy, a world not of truths but scenarios and options. Within this protean reality the world is full of responsive, shape shifting identities and personae, an entirely performative perspective.<sup>3</sup>

Computer rendering packages have allowed designers and architects to celebrate this desire for an indeterminate, diaphanous shimmering skin, offering, like the dance of the seven veils, a glimpse of something unimaginably exquisite, something forever shifting and changing; an enfolding plasma membrane.

The idea of the blurred and porous boundary, somehow responsive, eliciting intrigue while at the same time being inexpensive and easy to detail has been preoccupying me. For a recent commission we have been developing nomadic and reconfigurable semi private media viewing pods for use in a public museum space dedicated to exhibitions of the moving image in Melbourne. These screen lounge pods have been designed for use by small groups of people to view video on demand, play computer games, surf the net and produce their own content for viewing by others within the museum. The pods have been designed to seat between two and six people.

We were keen to emphasise the idea of the flow of data and energy through the building spaces, to create spaces that were not readily determined immediately, with the intention of creating curiosity, with surfaces that wrapped around the lounge spaces but did not isolate them. Drawing from the vocabulary of video and film production we wanted to design an exterior skin that reflected this character, alluding to scanning, sampling and the jump cut, to create a discontinuous and fragmented porous surface that suggested the voyeuristic and participatory nature of television. We also saw this discontinuous nature as being reminiscent of the experience of the city.

The pods have been designed with an external skin of matt finished reflective raw aluminium panels and translucent fibreglass. This way the architectural forms and surfaces of the surrounding building are picked up and reflected in the surface of the pods. The 6mm external skin is expressed at either end, projecting beyond the structural frame emphasising its presence as a thin surface enfolding the space. The key presence of the pods is in fact their interiors, each monochromatically toned in one of the three colours of television: red, green or blue. These colours will be softly bounced off the reflective surfaces and beamed out into the surrounding gallery space.

The walls of the screen lounge pods consist of three layers. The outer surface of the pod is louvred to break down the solidity of the surface. Behind the louvres is a black mesh wall, the middle membrane. The louvres offer the illusion that the interior can readily be glimpsed, an invitation to voyeurism. In fact behind the louvres and the mesh is a mostly solid wall with only a small number of peep holes which offer selected views into the interior. The inner surface of the louvres is mirrored so as to reflect and distort any image that does present itself from the interior. This achieves an amplification of the sense of activity from within while further fragmenting it. The passer by, in motion, glimpses the peep holes discontinuously, in a row interrupted by the screening rhythm of the outer vertical louvres. This apparatus acts like a Zoetrope, the early hand held mechanical forerunner to cinema, creating a strange slightly suspended sequence of fragmentary images. This is caused by the phenomenon of persistence of vision.

Viewed from the interior of the pod the inner wall is a padded, with an array of peep holes at eye height. From within the occupant looks out through the padded wall and the black metal mesh beyond and out past the mirrored louvres to the surrounding space. From within the view of the outside is now distorted and fragmented by the louvres.

Architecturally, the exterior marble lattices of the Mughal architects of the Sixteenth century in northern India <sup>4</sup> and the shuttered, latticed, slatted, screened and fretworked envelopes of the light weight timber houses of tropical Queensland have provided us with the model of the indeterminate and porous skin. It is however the promise of the shimmering filmy plasma membrane that we dream of.

#### Bibliography

1 August Schmarsow, *Das Wesen der architektonischen Schöpfung*, Leipzig 1894, p. 05.

2 Mary Lou Lobsinger, "Cedric Price, An architecture of the performance", *Daidalos* 74 Berlin 2000, pp. 22-29

3 Jeremy Rifkin, *The age of access*, Penguin, London 2000.

4 Sophia and Stefan Behling, *Sol Power, The evolution of solar architecture*, Prestel-Verlag, Munich 1996, pp. 116-119