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AA Files
Architectural Association
36 Bedford Square
London, WC1B 3ES
+44 (0)20 7887 4000
aaschool.ac.uk

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Editor
Maria Shéhérazade Giudici

Deputy Editor
Rory James Sherlock

Graphic Design
Andrew Reid

Proofreading
Charlotte Jones

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Hans Hollein’s Body Architecture

Beatrice Lampariello
and Silvia Groaz

The human body has always grounded both architectural practice and discourse.¹ Its idealised proportions were used to establish systems of architectural rules and meanings; its states and sensations were objectified in the romantic theories of Edmund Burke and the ‘affecting experience’ of Heinrich Wölfflin; its nerves and bones were read as anthropomorphic metaphors by Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc; and its movement and health informed the functionalist and therapeutic shelters of the modern movement, so smoothly tailored to the body’s needs.

Yet at the end of the Second World War, a seismic shift occurred. No longer thought of simply as an objective reference with which to define, centre or fix norms, the body instead became a starting point for the very definition and understanding of architecture at large, as a reservoir of sensory, ritualistic and unconscious knowledge.² From the 1950s onwards, it was viewed as a complex entity capable of interacting with different layers of reality and embracing embryonic, monstrous, technological and extensible natures. Philosophers began to emphasise the need to understand the body in its ‘situations’, rather than in its ‘locations’; artists used it as a medium and a language of investigation; critics heralded its revolutionary transformation from object to subject. These new understandings of the body altered architecture’s constitutive definition and constructive logics. Thus, just as the body became a vital medium for the expression of political, environmental and feminist issues, architecture was simultaneously transformed into a medium that could embrace such diverse and changing demands.³

At the crossroads of this shift, within the Austrian neo-avant-garde, sat the multiform practice of Hans Hollein, whose obsessive exploration of the human body lasted a lifetime. Hollein’s corpus of work is extensive, but it was the paper projects and drawings made between the late 1950s and the 1970s, while his life was divided between Vienna and the United States, that led to the formulation of an entirely new paradigm we might now call *body architecture*.

Initially, this paradigm positioned the body as a cohesive whole, on the one hand, and as a set of organs that could relate to the scale of the building on the other. Later, it then expanded in scope to encompass the city at large as a *body-city-structure*, before ultimately developing into an imagined living environment that could act as a conceptual framework for the exploration of all scales of the extended architectural project: the *bodybuilding*. Here *building* was understood as both verb and noun, and was based on processes and actions from which structures would ‘spring into being’.⁴

The roots of Hollein’s interest in body-architecture relations can be found in his education in Catholic Austria, with its rich corporeal symbolism and mythology, and its visceral focus on the body of Christ, the sacraments and the rituals of everyday life.⁵ Yet his understanding of it not merely as a physical entity but as a reservoir of unconscious

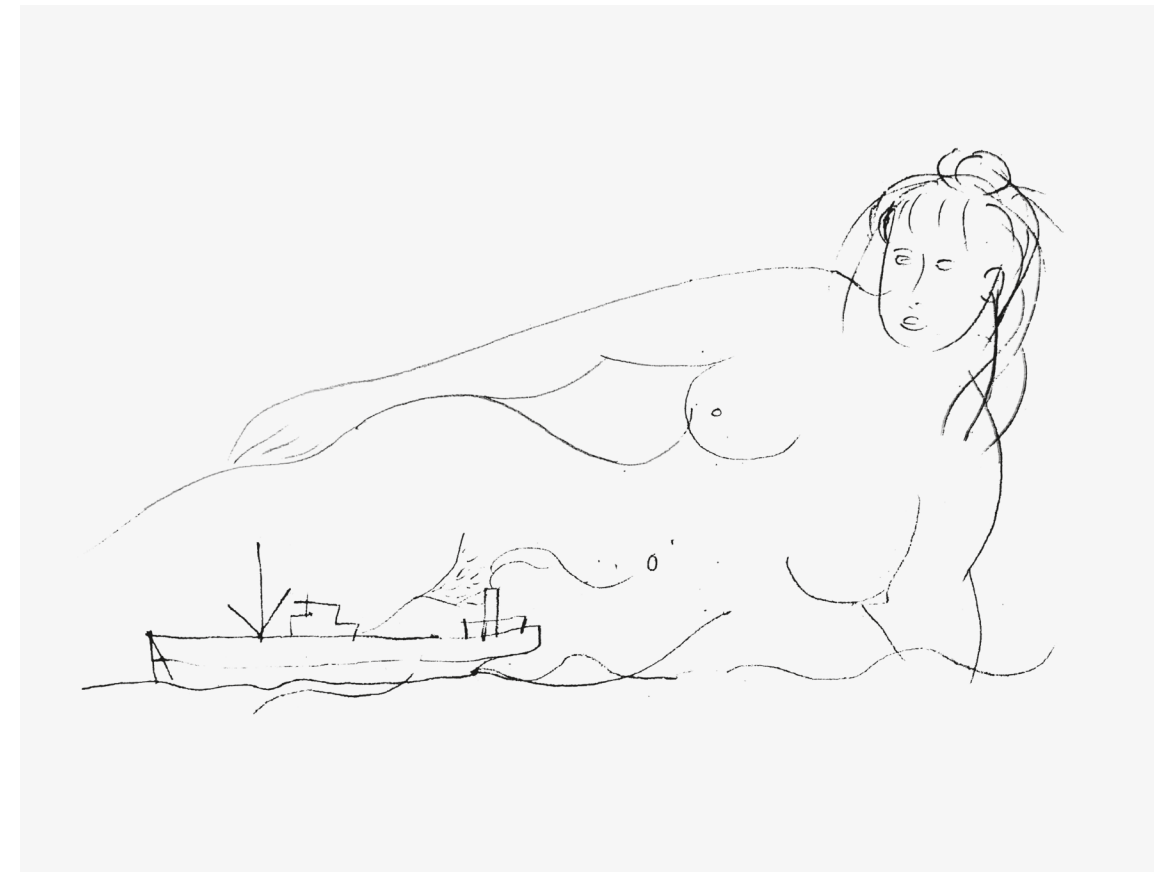
desires, fears and traumas also resonated more broadly with Vienna’s identity as the birthplace of modern medicine and psychoanalysis.⁶ His later encounters and exchanges with the Aktionismus Gruppe and their body-related artistic experiments during the 1950s and 1960s then further contributed to the construction of his perception of the body as a canvas upon which to explore pain, sexuality and the limits of human expression: a notion forged at the confluence of religious, cultural and scientific traditions situated within the Mitteleuropean literary, artistic and philosophical universe.

This system of references and connections expanded radically, however, during his travels to and studies in the United States. His stays at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago and the College of Environmental Design at Berkeley between 1958 and 1960, together with a long sojourn through Mexico and the American Southwest,⁷ acquainted him with both contemporary North American art practices and native ancestral traditions. He absorbed the first happenings of Allan Kaprow and Claes Oldenburg, even taking part in Kaprow’s *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* at the Reuben Gallery in New York, in 1959.⁸ He witnessed the rapid transformation of cities across North America, the towering verticality of which evoked anthropomorphic gestures. He traversed the vast emptiness of deserts and confronted the horizontality of the open landscape, which appeared to him as a plane yearning to be inhabited and activated by the presence of the human body. Finally, he was captivated by the ancestral rituals of Native Americans, for whom bodily symbolism and the sacred acts of sacrifice connected architecture to the cycles of life, death and renewal.

Each encounter profoundly shaped Hollein’s idea of the body, infusing it with a multilayered understanding that led to his interpretation of the architectural project as a synthetic medium upon which these forces could all act: Austrian Catholicism and North American paganism; history and popular culture; Austrian ritualistic happenings and North American behavioural ones; the stratified built fabric of Europe and both the natural landscape and urban density of North American metropolises and *pueblos*.

These discoveries in Hollein’s early years had an immediate effect on his work, and particularly his paper projects. Ranging from fragmentary portraits to designs for single buildings to entire cities, each idea unveils the extent to which architecture, for Hollein, was conceived as a primal sensory and environmental device – one that was able to catalyse new forms of contemporary bodily ritual, action and behaviour by welcoming and generating life.

To do so, the ‘building’, he explained, had to become the ‘expression of the human *per se* – flesh and spirit at the same time’,⁹ combining both its carnal and behavioural aspects. What Hollein’s paper projects bear witness to, then, is the transformation of architecture into body, flesh and spirit in a leap that was entirely out of step with other notable



protagonists of the Austrian neo-avant-garde. Besides the production of technological tools to enhance the body (seen in the work of Haus-Rucker-Co, Himmelb(l)au and Walter Pichler) or its use as a means by which to measure or understand urban space (as with Valie EXPORT and Missing Link), Hollein elevated the human body and its various parts as novel spatial configurations. Some of his projects therefore follow anthropomorphic traits, while others hint at more abstract evocations; some are designed to be read from distance, while others should be experienced sensually, close-up. Charged with both sacred and erotic values,¹⁰ they all testify to a profound shift in the interpretation of architecture using means both psychological, that acted on the ‘spirit’, and physical, rooted in the very ‘flesh’ of its structures. As such, architecture became an all-encompassing environment beyond any specific scale. According to Hollein’s reading of the body, architecture was no longer a matter of form and function, but an exploration of human experience that merges the tangible and intangible to redefine its very essence.

Hollein’s early paper projects thus mark a critical moment in his exploration of the human body as a pivotal component of the architectural project, concentrating mainly on the scale of the building, which is often depicted as a body either lying on the ground or standing upright. In some cases it maintains its sensuous form, evoking the primal connection between human beings and their environments. In others, however, it is more abstract and geometrised, as if to adapt it to the configuration of a prismatic building or a structured spatial sequence, blurring the boundaries between the anatomy of the body and that of the building. This reflects Hollein’s dual intention: to explore the shapes of the human flesh on the one hand and to investigate its transformation into an architectural entity on the other. As a result, a tension is established between organic and constructed; visceral and rational; erotic and sacred.

The sinuous, naked female is one of the first recurrent expressions of *body architecture*: one of pleasure and sensuality. A nude woman, often vibrantly coloured like those of Egon Schiele and Gustav Klimt, reclines on her back or side. She always appears on a neutral background or in a natural landscape, intersected by fluids and rivers of which she seems to be a natural extension. Yet the appearance of a ship alongside her in one case offers an important point of reflection on her possible role in Hollein’s imagination. If the ship might constitute a formal analogy between the sinuous shapes of the woman and those of the vessel, it is impossible to ignore that Le Corbusier, not long beforehand, had held up the *paquebot* as a model for new forms of living. Viewed from this perspective, Hollein’s nude woman can therefore be interpreted as a new *Unité d’habitation*, redefining proportions and indicating alternative possibilities for architecture.

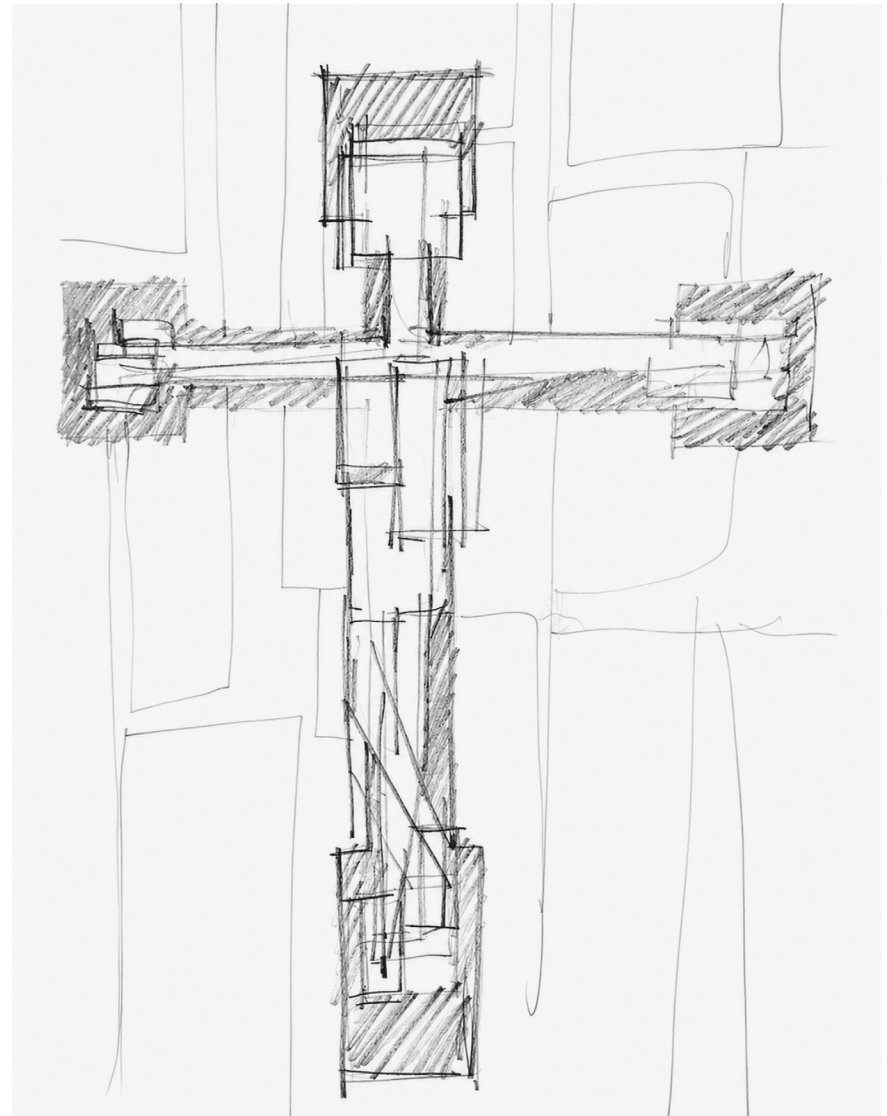
Instead of the masculine and geometric Modulor, the woman here is the measure of reality. Instead of the rigid,

Cartesian geometries of the modern movement, the woman represents an inhabitable, sensual cavity. Instead of the *brut* imprints so redolent of ageing skin,¹¹ the woman embodies a pulsating celebration of life. In this transformation, Hollein’s *Unité d’habitation* aligns with the contemporaneous, penetrable female bodies of Niki de Saint Phalle, the drawings and photographs of whom were selected to accompany one of his articles in *Bau*, the magazine that he edited.¹² ‘I think the human body, the potential of the human body – the naked human body – has very specific potentials which you can use for developing architecture’, he later recalled.¹³

After the woman, Hollein subjected a set of organs to a similar process of colossal enlargement whereby fleshy limbs, raised fists and genitals stand in for skyscrapers, stripping them of their technological and modernist connotations. This approach transcends mere anthropomorphism, investigating deeper meanings of architecture itself. The colossal body parts (eyes, noses and mouths) become instruments through which to see, smell, taste and perceive the world in an entirely new way. They colonise Manhattan and supersede its skyscrapers, dominating the skyline and reclaiming both architecture and the city in the process by way of the body. ‘Architecture is above all seen. But it is also felt, heard, smelt’, he explained.¹⁴

These configurations of organs should be interpreted within the experimental trajectories of Oldenburg’s giant sculptures, since Hollein had developed a friendship with the artist during his stays in the United States, even exchanging letters with him. Yet, if seen from an architectural perspective, the giant organs appear as variations of an *architecture parlante*, reminiscent of the Doric column that Adolf Loos transformed into a skyscraper for his entry to the Chicago Tribune competition. Within Hollein’s particular vision, however, they were seen as new, dominant and powerful ‘spaceradiators’.¹⁵ They were meant to establish new sensorial forces within the urban landscape, acting as ‘lighthouses’ that indicated the regeneration of new forms of life. Whether male or female, whether represented as a whole figure or merely a part, the human body here acts as a medium through which to convey messages to contemporary society. It redefines architecture as a living, breathing and transformative force that shapes life and its experience, rather than a static object. Hollein’s combination of ‘flesh’ and ‘spirit’ thus presents architecture simultaneously as a ‘sensual’ phenomenon and a ‘spiritual’ one. And in this transfiguration, the building ultimately becomes a sacred figure; one conceived as a site of sacrifice, suffering, transcendence and renewal.

It was by this manipulation of *body architecture* that Hollein, in 1958, schematically reimagined Cimabue’s Crucifix at Santa Croce (c 1265), using the portrait of the medieval suffering body as the basis of a plan composed of a series of interwoven spaces. In reinterpreting this religious image, Hollein here introduces a new model of existence that is



infused with the spirit of divine sacrifice, rescuing humanity from the restrictions of *Existenzminimum* and the prevailing diktats of Functionalism.¹⁶ Significantly, no explicit function is assigned to any of the individual spaces or to the plan as a whole, implying the possibility of an architecture driven by a symbolic and cultural programme. Perhaps even more significantly, the *body architecture* of Christ overlaps with a geometric grid that is evocative of an urban fabric. It appears almost as if the city had become, for Hollein, an abstract backdrop for a building that suffers, unfolds, bends, soars and regenerates: a ‘duck’ *ante litteram* to demonstrate the possibility of a resurrection not only of individuals, but also of both architecture and the city itself.

Hollein’s overlapping of Cimabue’s Christ with an abstract pattern reminiscent of urban fabric catalysed his conceptualisation of a *body architecture* that could extend far beyond the scale of the individual building. Revealed in this pivotal shift were the figurative influences rooted in his travels across the North American Southwest, where he encountered urban aggregations unlike any he had previously known, both in form and in function. In the pueblos, clay constructions were assembled one next to the other, and their walkable rooftops created complexes that could be classified as neither city nor building. Ancestral rituals were integrated into the ground, into the landscape itself, like maternal wombs that embraced and nurtured life. These structures combined habitation and sacred space, and intimately entwined the human body and its actions with the earth, defining an architecture free of conventional functional constraints. ‘Architecture’, Hollein later stated, ‘does not have a purpose...What we build are spaces, structures, which are looking for a purpose, are discovered and find a use.’¹⁷

From his experience of the Native American pueblos, Hollein derived another version of body architecture for his diploma project at Berkeley, in 1960. Entitled *Space in Space in Space*, it consisted of a complex of formless constructions that collectively constituted a vital organ that both contained and generated space. Generally elevated off the ground and hollow, the sinuous surfaces of the structures embraced the daily activities of their inhabitants and suggested new forms of social interaction. So deeply evocative were these constructions that they have been interpreted as a ‘primordial womb’.¹⁸ Represented through clay models that integrated them into the natural environment of a hypothetical desert in a deliberate effort to distort the perception of any dimensional scale, they also challenged the relationships between objects, architecture, city and territory.¹⁹

Devoid of any declared function or extent, Hollein used a particular German word to define the essence of his symbolic and regenerative ‘womb’: the ‘Gebilde’.²⁰ Neither a building nor a city, ‘Gebilde’ means instead a ‘thing’ or ‘structure’, and thus opens up the potential for a new kind of life: an *Existenzmaximum*, founded on direct bodily and

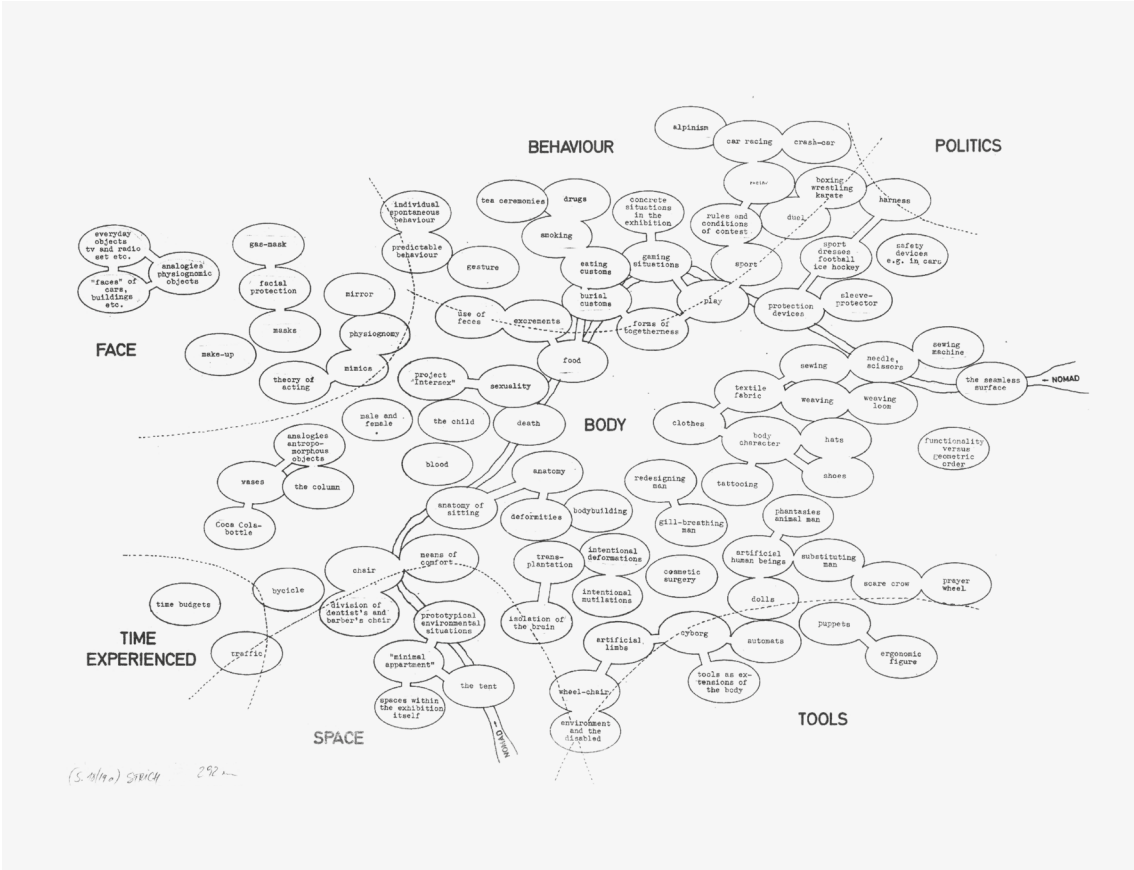
psychological stimuli, and a conceptual framework for the possible design of the landscape.

With a striking geographical transposition, Hollein in 1960 imagined this ‘primordial womb’ as a series of *City Structures* towering above Vienna, Salzburg and rural landscapes. Amid the wider context of post-war economic recovery and technological advancement in Europe, during which mechanistic megastructures were gaining international prominence, Hollein seems to suggest the need to redefine architecture starting from an altogether different premise; from primordial acts that are rooted in the ‘flesh’ and ‘spirit’ of the body. And so, his *body-city structure* is an attempt to restore to the city, at the time considered an alienating abode of human life, and to reassert its connotation as an ancestral form of shelter.

In light of these projects, Charles Jencks’ definition of Hollein’s work as ‘supersensualist’ takes on a new meaning, freeing it from any reference to Art Nouveau as an ethic of design focused entirely on human beings, their bodies and their behaviour.²¹ Hollein’s famous motto, ‘everything is architecture’, seems from this reading to imply that ‘everything is a body’.²² Not coincidentally, this adage was first published on the pages of *Bau* magazine, as a caption to an image of a female model reclining against the backdrop of a natural landscape – an embodiment of Hollein’s idea of the *Unité d’habitation* as a maternal and sensual womb.

More than any of his paper projects, however, it was another type of graphic representation, conceived in the early 1970s on the occasion of an exhibition at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, that perhaps most astutely encapsulated the value of the body in Hollein’s unique interpretation of design.²³ No longer a building or an urban structure, here the body constitutes the structure of a method capable of guiding architectural design according to a principle of abstraction: a mental map of considerations related to the organisation of space, behaviours, living tools and politics, demonstrating the centrality of bodies interacting in space. The map’s anatomy encompasses not only typical bodily features but also ‘mutilations’ and ‘deformations’. It highlights the body’s different stages of life and age, as well as its complex nature, extending to its enhancement into a ‘cyborg’ or ‘automat’. Each transformation of the map dictates the configuration and character of the body’s shelters and projections, which in turn become nothing more than extensions of the body itself. This, for Hollein, was the ‘bodybuilding’.

Far from a mere metaphor, the ‘bodybuilding’ was a fundamental concept that carried a dual resonance, since it referenced both the physical act of creating structures and the conceptual process by which architectures could be conceived as living organisms. The ‘building’, having assumed a ‘body’, is therefore imbued with its own life cycle, including the phases of birth, use, transformation, consumption and death. ‘We must allow [the building] to die’, Hollein asserted.²⁴



For Hollein, it was necessary to accept decay, obsolescence and regeneration as integral parts of the architectural process, beyond any aspiration it might have towards timeless permanence. This underscores a nascent understanding of architecture at the dawn of postmodernity; at the edge of the building’s transition from static entity to dynamic, living being that could both accept and generate new forms of living. Hollein’s ‘bodybuilding’, like the bodies it serves, possesses a life cycle of its own, hinting at the possibility of spiritual and carnal regeneration, and reflecting the complexities and possibilities of human and transcendental existence. From his obsession with the body and his experimentation with it as figure and metaphor, as sacred corporeal form and urban structure, as regenerative womb and spatial abstraction, Hollein derived a critical lesson; that architecture, like the sacred body of Christ and the female body, embodies life, transformation and renewal.

First image: Hans Hollein, untitled drawing, c1958–59. Image courtesy the Hollein family archive, Vienna.
Second image: Hans Hollein, untitled drawing, c1958–59.
Third image: Hans Hollein, untitled drawing, c1974–76. Images courtesy the Hollein family archive, Vienna.

- 1 This article is the result of a joint effort by both authors: the first part, up to footnote 13, was written by Silvia Groaz, and the second by Beatrice Lampariello.
- 2 See Dominique Rouillard, *Superarchitecture* (Éditions de la Villette, 2004).
- 3 See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964).
- 4 See Hans Hollein, ‘Plastic Space’, master’s thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1960.
- 5 See Alessandro Melis et al, ‘The History and Invocation of the Arche in Austrian Radical Architecture Thinking’, in *Cogent Social Sciences*, no 1, 2017, pp 1–19.
- 6 Alys X George, *The Naked Truth: Viennese Modernism and the Body* (University of Chicago Press, 2020).
- 7 Caroline Maniaque, ‘The American Travels of European Architects, 1958–1973’, in Jilly Traganou and Miodrag Mitrašinović (eds), *Travel, Space, Architecture* (Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009), pp 189–209; and Eva Branscome, *Hans Hollein and Postmodernism. Art and Architecture in Austria, 1958–1985* (Routledge, 2018).
- 8 Liane Lefaivre, ‘Everything is Architecture, Multiple Hans Hollein and the Art of Crossing Over’, in *Harvard Design Magazine*, no 18, 2003, pp 1–5.
- 9 Hans Hollein, ‘Architektur’, in Architekturzentrum Wien (ed), *The Austrian Phenomenon, Architecture Avantgarde Austria* (Birkhäuser, 2009), p 35.
- 10 See Hans Hollein, ‘ Erotische Architektur’, in *Hans Hollein, Schriften & Manifeste* (die Angewandte, 2002).
- 11 See Le Corbusier, *Œuvre complète 1946–52*, Volume 5 (Éditions Girsberger, 1953).
- 12 Hans Hollein, ‘Alles ist Architektur’, in *Bau*, no 1–2, 1968, pp 2–31.
- 13 Hans Hollein, Interview with Karen Marie Bredegaard, 28 December 2001, typescript, pp 1–26 (Architekturzentrum Wien).
- 14 Hans Hollein, ‘Back to Architecture’, in Architekturzentrum Wien (ed), *The Austrian Phenomenon, Architecture Avantgarde Austria*, op cit, p 33.
- 15 Hans Hollein, ‘Städte, Brennpunkte des Lebens’, in *Der Aufbau*, no 19, 1963, pp 115–8.
- 16 Hollein’s critique of Functionalism and its principles based on ‘function’ had already begun to take shape in the early 1960s. See Hollein, ‘Back to Architecture’, op cit, p 33; and Hans Hollein, *Hans Hollein. Alles ist Architektur. Eine Ausstellung zum Thema Tod* (Städtisches Museum Abteiberg, 1970).
- 17 Hans Hollein, ‘Back to Architecture’, op cit, p 32.
- 18 Germano Celant, ‘Rites and Sites, Hans Hollein’, in Artforum, no 8, 1990, pp 124–8.
- 19 See Craig Buckley, *Graphic Assembly* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019).
- 20 Hans Hollein, ‘Back to Architecture’, op cit, p 32.
- 21 Charles Jencks, ‘The Supersensualists, Part II’, in *Architectural Design*, no 1, 1971, pp 18–21.
- 22 See Hans Hollein, ‘Alles ist Architektur’, op cit.
- 23 On this exposition, see Samuel Korn, ‘An Environment of Environments: MAN transFORMS – Curatorial Modes, Designs, Structures’, in *Architectural Theory Review*, no 23, 2019, pp 59–89.
- 24 Hans Hollein, ‘Back to Architecture’, op cit, p 33.

IDO AVISSAR is an architect and urbanist. In 2012, he founded LIST, a practice focused on projects that bridge multiple disciplines. His work spans research, masterplanning and architectural design. He completed his PhD, ‘Intense Neutrality’, in 2018. He is currently the chair of Fragments at Paris-Est and a visiting professor at Sciences Po and ETH Zürich.

FEDERICO CAMPAGNA is an Italian British philosopher. He is the author of *Otherworlds* (2025), *Prophetic Culture* (2021) and *Technic and Magic* (2018). He teaches at the RCA and ECAL, directs the art and philosophy school AGORA, and is associate fellow at the Warburg Institute. He cofounded the publishing house Timeo and works at Verso.

GREGORI CIVERA is a Spanish photographer. His work has recently been included in ‘Unknown City Beneath the Mist’, MACBA (2024) and ‘Fever of Matter’, àngels barcelona (2025). He has documented buildings by the Taller de Arquitectura for more than two decades.

JOLANDA DEVALLE is an architect and PhD candidate at EPFL, where she is part of the Theory and Project of Domestic Space Laboratory. She is an editor of *Burning Farm: A Journal on Architecture and Domestic Space*, and co-editor of *Order and Disorder*, a forthcoming anthology of writings by Manfredo Tafuri.

GEORGIOS EFTAXIOPOULOS is an architect, assistant professor of architecture and urbanism at the University of California, Berkeley, and principal at the architecture and urban design practice EO. He previously practised in Belgium and Switzerland and, most recently, has taught at the Royal College of Art, the Architectural Association and the Aarhus School of Architecture.

EREZ GOLANI SOLOMON is a senior lecturer in architectural theory and design, specialising in Japanese architecture and cities. He teaches at Waseda University in Tokyo and the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design.

SILVIA GROAZ is an architect, assistant professor at the Université de Liège, Belgium, and associate professor at the École d’Architecture de la Ville & des Territoires Paris-Est, France. A curator and author of several books, her work focuses on architecture of the second half of the 20th century.

BEATRICE LAMPARIELLO is an architect and associate professor at the Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium. Her research explores 20th-century constructive and poetic experiments that sought to imagine new ways of living, resulting in books and exhibitions.

CARLOS H MATOS is an architect based in Tenochtitlán.

BOLAJI OWOSENI is a senior research associate on the British Academy Global Professorship project ‘West African Communities through Museum Collections’ at the Sainsbury Research Unit, University of East Anglia. She previously held a postdoctoral fellowship at the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, Cambridge. Her research focuses on West African archaeology and material culture.

IRÉNÉE SCALBERT is an architectural critic and historian based in London. His latest book is *Totems* (Park Books, 2026). He lectures at the AA.

NICHOLAS SIMCIK ARESE is chair of History and Theory at the Architectural Association.

HUGH STRANGE is the founder of London-based Hugh Strange Architects and associate professor at the London School of Architecture. In 2024, Hugh was awarded a doctorate at AHO, the Oslo School of Architecture and Design. His PhD is titled ‘Architecture at the Building Site’.

MADDY WEAVERS is an editor based in London. She is deputy editor of *Real Review*, having worked for *Apartamento* and *Drawing Matter*. She trained as an architect and now collaborates with architectural organisations and publications.

RICHARD WENTWORTH, artist and exhibition maker, has enjoyed a long association with the AA.