

## Body Architecture: A Transatlantic Perspective on Hans Hollein

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The human body has always underlain both architectural practice and discourse.<sup>1</sup> Historically, its idealised proportions provided a system of architectural rules and meanings; its states and sensations were objectified in the Romantic theories of Edmund Burke and in the ‘affecting experience’ of Heinrich Wölfflin; its nerves and bones became anthropomorphic metaphors for Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc; its movement and health informed the functionalist and therapeutic shelters of the Modern Movement, smoothly tailored to the body’s needs. Yet, at the end of the Second World War, a seismic shift occurred.

No longer simply an objectified reference necessary to define, centre, or fix norms,<sup>2</sup> the body became the starting point for the definition and understanding of architecture. From the 1950s onwards, the body emerged as a reservoir of sensory, ritualistic, and unconscious knowledge.<sup>3</sup> It evolved into a complex entity capable of interacting with different layers of reality, embracing embryonic, monstrous, technological, and extensible natures. Philosophers emphasised the need to understand the body in its ‘situations’ rather than in its ‘locations’;<sup>4</sup> artists used the body as a medium and language of investigation (Body Art); critics heralded a revolutionary change, where ‘the body from object became subject’.<sup>5</sup> These new multilayered understandings of the body influenced theories and practices in architecture, altering its constitutive definition and constructive logics. Just as the body became a medium for political, environmental, and feminist issues, architecture was transformed into a medium<sup>6</sup> to embrace these diverse and evolving demands.

At the crossroads of body’s investigations, within the Austrian neo-avant-garde, was the multiform practice of Hans Hollein (1934-2014). Starting from the late 1950s, Hollein, then barely over twenty years old, embarked on an obsessive exploration of the human body that would accompany him throughout his lifetime. Within his extensive body of work, this article focuses on his paper projects and drawings conceived between the late 1950s and the 1970s, while his life was divided between Vienna and the United States.

Hollein’s intense engagement in the exploration of the human body led to the formulation of a new paradigm, which, despite evolving over time through ever-changing articulations, can be defined as *body architecture*. Initially, it entailed the body as a cohesive whole or as fragments of organs, maintaining the scale of the building. Later, it expanded to conquer and transform the city, to the point of reaching a *body-city-structure*. Ultimately, it evolved into a living environment acting as a conceptual framework for the exploration of all scales of the expanded architectural project: the *bodybuilding*. This concept understood the *building* both as a verb and a noun, and was based on notions of process and action where structures ‘spring into being’.<sup>7</sup> Within the contemporary contested context of the Anthropocene and amidst debates advocating for extension of the notion of architecture, the understanding of Hollein’s *body architecture* becomes essential to demonstrate how the complex vision of the body has influenced the conception of architecture as equally complex and hybrid.

### Towards an Architecture of ‘Flesh’ and ‘Spirit’

Hollein’s interest in body-architecture relations stemmed from European traditions and North American influences. He was educated in Catholic Austria, with its rich corporeal symbolism and

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<sup>1</sup> This text is co-authored: Beatrice Lampariello wrote §§1–2; Silvia Groaz wrote §§3–4; the introduction was drafted jointly.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Vidler, ‘The Building in Pain: The Body and Architecture in Post-Modern Culture’, in *AA Files*, no 19, 1990, pp 3-10.

<sup>3</sup> Dominique Rouillard, *Superarchitecture. Le futur de l’architecture 1950-1970*, Éditions de la Villette, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard, 1945.

<sup>5</sup> Lea Vergine, *Il corpo come linguaggio. La ‘body-art’ e storie simili*, Prearo, 1974.

<sup>6</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964.

<sup>7</sup> Hans Hollein, *Plastic Space*, 1960, n.p. (Architekturzentrum Wien).

mythology,<sup>8</sup> and with its visceral focus on the body of Christ and the sacraments, which provided a cultural framework that tied the physical bodies to the rituals of everyday life. Hollein's understanding of the body not merely as a physical entity, but also as a reservoir of unconscious desires, fears and traumas, resonates with Vienna's position as the birthplace of modern medicine and psychoanalysis.<sup>9</sup> Also, his encounters and exchanges during the 1950s and 1960s with the artists known as the Aktionismus Gruppe and their body-related artistic experiments, contributed to the construction of his complex perception of the body as a canvas to explore pain, sexuality and the limits of human expression. His vision developed at the confluence of religious, cultural and scientific traditions situated within the Mitteleuropean literary, artistic and philosophical universe which challenged the various levels of the body's existence, sexuality and consciousness.

This system of references expanded radically during Hollein's travels and studies in the United States. His stays at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago and at the College of Environmental Design at Berkeley between 1958 and 1960, together with a long travel through Mexico and the American Southwest,<sup>10</sup> allowed him to become acquainted with contemporary North American references and native ancestral traditions. He absorbed the performative, bodily actions central to the first happenings of Allan Kaprow and Claes Oldenburg—he even took part in Kaprow's *18 Happenings 6 Parts* at the Reuben Gallery in New York in 1959.<sup>11</sup> He encountered the rapidly transforming North American urban landscape, where the towering verticality of expanding cities evoked anthropomorphic gestures. He traversed the vast emptiness of deserts and the horizontality of open landscape, which seemed to him like planes yearning to be inhabited and activated by the presence of the human body. Finally, he was captivated by the ancestral rituals of Native Americans, where bodily symbolism and the sacred acts of sacrifice resonate deeply, connecting architecture to cycles of life, death and renewal.<sup>12</sup> These juxtaposed encounters profoundly shaped his vision of the body, infusing it with a multilayered understanding which led to an interpretation of the architectural project as a synthesis where all the different forces discovered could act: Austrian Catholicism and North American paganism, historic culture and popular one, Austrian ritualistic happenings with North American behavioural ones, the stratified fabric of Europe with the natural landscape and urban density of North American metropolises and *pueblos*.

The discoveries of Hollein's early years had immediate effects on his sketches, texts, and exhibitions, particularly in his paper projects drawn during his time living between Austria and the United States. Ranging from fragmentary portraits, to projects for single buildings which would welcome any kind of spaces—religious, domestic or civic—to entire cities, the paper projects unveil the extent to which architecture for him became a primal sensory environmental device, able to catalyse new forms of contemporary body rituals, actions and behaviours. By becoming a body welcoming and generating life, architecture could result in unprecedented spatial configurations.

The 'building', as he himself explained, had to become the 'expression of humans per se—flesh and spirit at the same time'<sup>13</sup>. The reference to 'flesh and spirit' signals his understanding of the 'building' in both its physical and carnal aspects, as well as its existential and behavioural dimensions, for an architecture capable of mirroring and responding to the necessities of the body. What the paper projects bear witness to is precisely this transformation of architecture into body,

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<sup>8</sup> Alessandro Melis, John David Michael, Allan Balaara, 'The history and invocation of the *Arche* in Austrian Radical architecture thinking', in *Cogent Social Sciences*, no 1, 2017, n.p., doi:10.1080/23311886.2017.1268366.

<sup>9</sup> Alys X. George, *The Naked Truth: Viennese Modernism and the Body*, University of Chicago Press, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Caroline Maniaque, 'The American Travels of European Architects, 1958-1973', in Jilly Traganou, Miodrag Mitrašinović (eds.), *Travel, Space, Architecture*, Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009, pp 189-209; Eva Branscome, *Hans Hollein and Postmodernism. Art and architecture in Austria, 1958-1985*, Routledge, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Liane Lefaivre, 'Everything is Architecture. Multiple Hans Hollein and the Art of Crossing Over', in *Harvard Design Magazine*, no 18, 2003, pp 1-5.

<sup>12</sup> Hans Hollein, Typescript text, 25 September 1972, HN-066-005-Dok (Architekturzentrum Wien).

<sup>13</sup> Hans Hollein, 'Architektur', in *Architektur*, 1963, n.p.

flesh and spirit, which appears entirely unprecedented compared to the contemporary operations of other protagonists of the Austrian neo-avant-garde. Besides the conception of technological tools to enhance the body (Haus-Rucker-Co; Coop Himmel(b)lau; Walter Pichler), or the use of the body itself to measure or understand the urban space (Valie EXPORT; Missing Link), Hollein elevated the human body or its various parts—both male and female—to spatial configurations. Some of these projects follow anthropomorphic traits, while others hint at more abstract evocations, and are designed either to be perceived from a distance or for sensual close-up explorations. Charged with sacred and erotic values,<sup>14</sup> they all testify to a profound shift in the interpretation of architecture. Initially conceived as a construction at the scale of the building or the city, it became an all-encompassing environment: a project which expands the notion of architecture beyond any specific scale, through means which are both psychological—acting on the ‘spirit’—as well as physical—rooted in the very ‘flesh’ of its structures. Through these operations, architecture was no longer just a matter of form and function, but became an exploration of human experience, merging the tangible and intangible to redefine its essence.

### The Body and the Building

In the genealogy of Hollein’s *body architecture*, his early paper projects, dating from 1956 to the late 1960s, mark a critical moment in his exploration of the human body as a pivotal component of the architectural project. These projects concentrate on the scale of the building, depicted like bodies either lying on the ground or standing upright. The body in Hollein’s work oscillates between maintaining its sensuous forms evoking the primal connection between human beings and their environments, and being abstracted and geometrised, as if to adapt it to the configuration of a prismatic building or a structured spatial sequence. In this exploration, Hollein blurred the boundaries between the anatomy of the body and that of the building, reflecting a dual intention: on one hand, to explore the shapes of the human flesh, and on the other, to investigate its transformation into an architectural entity, establishing a tension between the organic and the constructed, the visceral and the rational, the erotic and the sacred.

The sinuous, naked female is one of the first to be translated, from 1958, into a variant of *body architecture*, evoking pleasure and sensuality. A nude woman, often vibrantly coloured, reclines on her back or side. She always appears on a neutral background or natural landscapes intersected by fluids and rivers almost to become their natural extension. Her origin can be traced back to the Austrian artistic imagination, such as in Egon Schiele’s drawings, or Gustav Klimt’s paintings. Yet, the appearance of a ship alongside the female figure offers an important point of reflection on the possible and alternative origin and role of that woman in Hollein’s imagination (Fig. 1). If the ship might be attributed to a formal analogy between the sinuous shapes of the woman and those of the vessel, it is impossible to ignore that, during the 1950s, Le Corbusier had elevated the *paquebot* to a decisive reference for new forms of living. Viewed from this perspective, Hollein’s nude woman can then be interpreted as a new *Unité d’habitation*, redefining proportions and indicating alternative forms of architecture. Instead of the masculine and geometric Modulor, the woman becomes the measure of reality. Instead of the Cartesian geometries of the Modern Movement, the woman becomes an inhabitable sensual cavity. Instead of the *brut* imprints reflecting the ageing skin,<sup>15</sup> the woman embodies a pulsating celebration of life. In this transformative process, Hollein’s *Unité d’habitation* aligns with contemporary penetrable female bodies of Niki de Saint Phalle. It is no coincidence that drawings and photographs of De Saint Phalle’s body-centred works were selected by Hollein to accompany one of his articles in *Bau*, the magazine he directed<sup>16</sup> (Fig. 2). ‘I think the human body, the potential of the human body—the

<sup>14</sup> Hans Hollein, ‘Back to Architecture’ [1962], in Architekturzentrum Wien (ed.), *The Austrian Phenomenon. Architecture Avantgarde Austria*, Birkhäuser, 2009, pp 32-34; Hans Hollein, ‘ Erotische Architektur - wie könnte sie aussehen?’ [1967], in Hans Hollein, *Schriften & Manifeste*, die Angewandte, 2005, n.p.

<sup>15</sup> Le Corbusier, *Œuvre complète 1946-52*, vol 5, Éditions Girsberger, 1953.

<sup>16</sup> Hans Hollein, ‘Alles ist Architektur’, in *Bau. Schrift für Architektur und Umwelt*, no 1-2, 1968, pp 2-31.

naked human body—has very specific potentials which you can use for developing architecture’, he would later recall.<sup>17</sup>

In the transformation of the body into a building, after the woman, between 1959 and 1960, a series of organs are similarly subjected to a colossal enlargement. Fleshy limbs, raised fists, and genitals welcome the vital functions of skyscrapers, stripped of their technological and modernist connotations (Fig. 3). Yet Hollein’s approach transcends mere anthropomorphism, investigating deeper meanings for architecture itself. The colossal body parts—eyes, noses and mouths—become instruments to see, smell, taste and perceive architecture and the city in an entirely new way (Fig. 4). They colonise Manhattan and supersede skyscrapers dominating the skyline, for a reclamation of architecture and the city that places at its centre the body. ‘Architecture is above all seen. But it is also felt, heard, smelt’, he explained.<sup>18</sup>

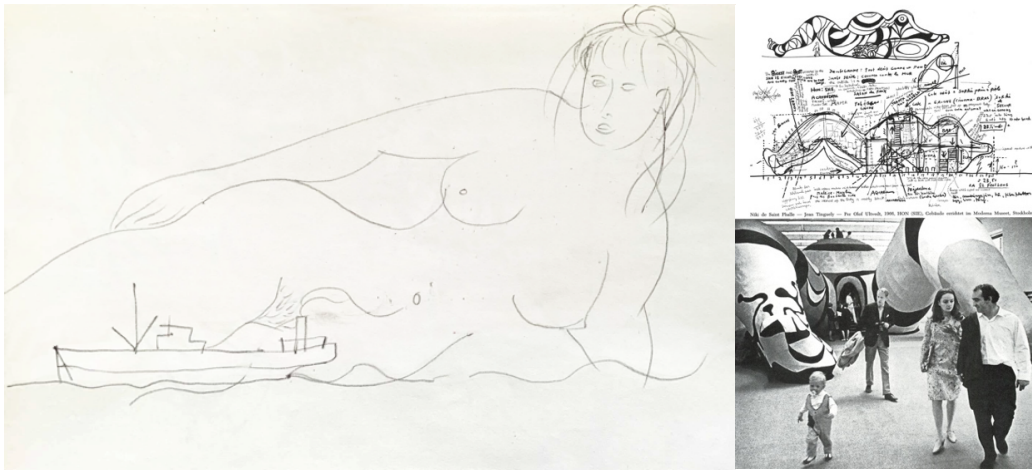


Fig. 1 Hans Hollein, No title, n.d. [1958-1959] (Family Archive, Vienna).

Fig. 2 Hans Hollein, ‘Alles ist Architektur’, in *Bau. Schrift für Architektur und Umwelt*, no 1-2, 1968, p 12.

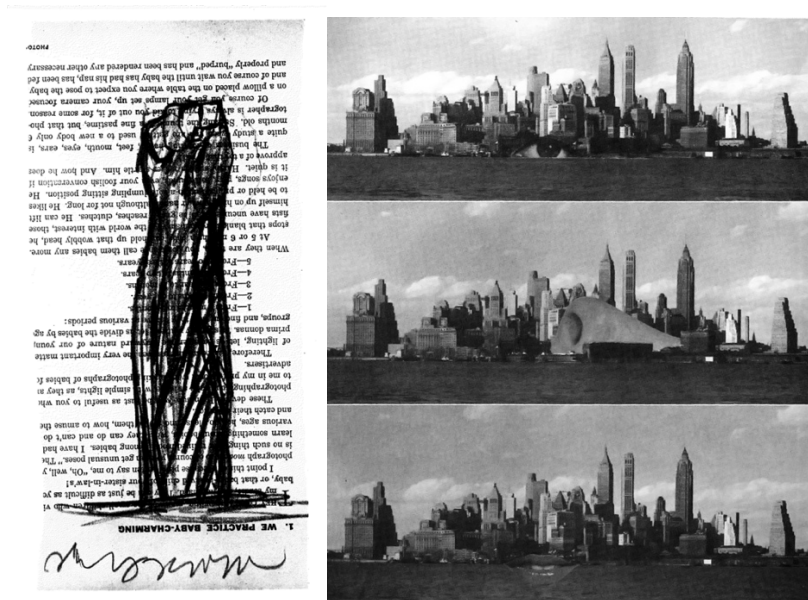


Fig. 3 Hans Hollein, Skyscraper, Chicago, 1958 (Architekturzentrum Wien).

Fig. 4 Hans Hollein, *Transformations*, 1968 (Dominique Rouillard, *Superarchitecture. Le futur de l'architecture 1950-1970*, Éditions de la Villette, 2004).

<sup>17</sup> Hans Hollein, Interview with Karen Marie Bredegaard, 2002 (Architekturzentrum Wien).

<sup>18</sup> Hans Hollein, ‘Back to Architecture’ [1962], op cit, p 33.

Their configuration must be reinterpreted within the experimental trajectories of Oldenburg's giant sculptures, with whom Hollein had developed a friendship during his stays in the United States, even engaging in an exchange of letters with him.<sup>19</sup> Yet, if seen from an architectural perspective these giant organs appear as variations of an *architecture parlante*, reminiscent of the Doric column transformed by Austrian architect Adolf Loos into a skyscraper for the Chicago Tribune competition. They became, in Hollein's vision, new, dominant and powerful 'spaceradiators'.<sup>20</sup> They were meant to establish new sensorial forces within the urban landscape and become 'lighthouses' indicating the regeneration of new forms of life. Whether male or female, whether represented as a whole figure or merely a part, the human body thus becomes a medium for conveying messages to contemporary society:<sup>21</sup> the redefinition of architecture not as a static structure but as a living, breathing, and transformative force that shapes life and its experience. It is not surprising then, that in Hollein's sequence of paper projects from the second half of the 1960s the façades of buildings sometimes took the form of a literal human face, like a symbolic mask applied to architecture to observe the city and, in turn, to be observed. Unsurprisingly many of these faces are imagined as storefronts, doubling as advertising signs. Sometimes individual elements of façades are transfigured into other bodily evocations: two soaring columns of polished stainless steel in the Feigen Gallery built in 1969 are conceived as simultaneously man and woman forming an intimate embrace with erotic connotations, according to Hollein's own writings.<sup>22</sup>

The combined definition of *flesh* and *spirit* provides precise insights into the interpretation of the body in Hollein's architecture presenting it as simultaneously a 'sensual phenomenon' and 'spiritual phenomenon'. In the process of transfiguration to which Hollein subjects architecture, the building ultimately becomes, by the end of the 1950s, a sacred figure, conceived as a site for sacrifice, suffering, transcendence and renewal. This perspective can be traced back to his Catholic upbringing, enriched by artistic references for a *body architecture* seeking to restore the original three-dimensionality—and thus the very life—of the flat, two-dimensional bodies depicted in the Renaissance paintings. Thus, the crucified Christ represented by Cimabue underwent a schematic reimagining, evolving into a plan composed of a series of interwoven spaces (Fig. 5). The central role of the suffering body as a tool for the regeneration of Hollein's architecture is confirmed throughout the years, first in the form of paper projects for a series of *Sakrale Gebäude* [Sacred Buildings, 1959-1960], then as a sacrificial wound becoming façade (Schullin I Jewellery, 1972) and platform at the scale of the exhibition (Venice Biennale, 1972), or of the city (Olympic Village in Munich, 1972).

The reinterpretation of a religious image introduces a new way of existence infused with the spirit of the divine sacrifice, rescuing humanity from the restrictions of *Existenzminimum* and the diktats of Functionalism. Significantly, no explicit function is assigned to the individual spaces or to the plan as a whole, implying the possibility of an architecture driven by a symbolic and cultural programme. The *body architecture* of Christ overlaps in Hollein's drawing to a geometric grid evocative of an urban fabric, as if the city had become, for him, an abstract backdrop upon which to overlay 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 architecture and the city itself.

### Body City-Structures

The insight to overlap Cimabue's Christ on an abstract pattern evocative of an urban fabric became a catalyst for Hollein to conceptualise a *body architecture* that extends beyond the scale

<sup>19</sup> Hans Hollein, Letter to Claes Oldenburg, 14 February 1968, *Korrespondenz* (Architekturzentrum Wien).

<sup>20</sup> Hans Hollein, *Plastic Space*, op cit; Hans Hollein, 'Städte - Brennpunkte des Lebens', in *Der Aufbau*, no 19, 1963, pp 115-118.

<sup>21</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, op cit.

<sup>22</sup> Hans Hollein, No title, n.d., *Projektbeschreibung\_HN\_022\_Feigen* (Architekturzentrum Wien).

of individual buildings, to engage with the urban scale of the city. This pivotal shift reveals the figurative influences stemming from his travels in the American Southwest. It was there that Hollein discovered urban aggregations that were subversive compared to anything he had previously known, both in their form and in their functions: clay constructions assembled one next to the other, with walkable rooftops, creating a complex that can no longer be classified under any traditional definition, neither as a city, nor as a building (Fig. 6). In the *pueblos*, ancestral rituals were integrated into the ground and into the landscape, as if they were maternal wombs embracing and nurturing life. These structures combined habitation and sacred spaces where the human body and its actions were intimately intertwined with earth, defining spaces free from conventional functional constraints: ‘Architecture does not have a purpose [...]. What we build are spaces, structures, which are looking for a purpose, are discovered, and find a use’.<sup>23</sup>

From his discovery of the Native American *pueblos*, Hollein derived another version of his *body architecture*: his diploma project at Berkeley University in 1960. Titled *Space in Space in Space*, it consisted of a complex of formless constructions (Fig. 7). Generally elevated off the ground and hollow, forming a vital organ that contains and generates space, the formless construction embraced the daily activities of their inhabitants within its continuous sinuous surfaces, offering new forms of interaction.<sup>24</sup> So deeply evocative were these constructions, that they could be interpreted as a ‘primordial womb’.<sup>25</sup> Its representation through clay models integrated into the natural environment of a hypothetical desert was reminiscent of the North American examples much regarded by Hollein. This integration was a deliberate effort to distort the perception of any dimensional scale,<sup>26</sup> challenging the relationship between objects, architecture, city and territory. Devoid of any declared function or specific scale, Hollein used a particular German word to define the essence of his symbolic and regenerative ‘womb’: the ‘Gebilde’.<sup>27</sup> Neither a building nor a city, ‘Gebilde’ means a ‘thing’ or ‘structure’, inviting a new kind of life: an *Existenzmaximum* founded on direct bodily and psychological stimuli, providing a conceptual framework for the possible design of the landscape.

With a striking geographical transposition, Hollein imagines the transformation of the ‘primordial womb’ in a series of *City Structures*, depicted in 1960 and towering above Vienna, Salzburg or rural landscapes (Fig. 8). In the years of economic recovery and technological advancements, while mechanistic megastructures gained international prominence, Hollein seems to suggest the need to redefine architecture starting from primordial acts rooted in the ‘flesh’ and ‘spirit’ of the body. Thus the ‘body-city structure’ is able to restore to the city, then considered as the alienating abode of human life, its connotation as an ancestral shelter.

In light of these projects, Charles Jencks’s definition of Hollein’s work as ‘supersensualist’ takes on a new meaning.<sup>28</sup> It frees itself from any reference to Art Nouveau and becomes the most precise explanation of a design entirely focused on human beings, their bodies, and their behaviour. Hence, one could even interpret Hollein’s famous 1968 motto, ‘everything is architecture’, as implying ‘everything is a body’.<sup>29</sup> Not coincidentally, this very motto was made to be uttered, on the pages of *Bau* magazine, voiced by a female model reclining against the backdrop of a natural landscape, embodying Hollein’s idea of *Unité d’habitation* as a maternal and sensual womb (Fig. 9).

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<sup>23</sup> Hans Hollein, ‘Back to Architecture’ [1962], op cit, p 32.

<sup>24</sup> Hans Hollein, *Plastic Space*, op cit.

<sup>25</sup> Germano Celant, ‘Rites and Sites. Hans Hollein’, in *Artforum*, no 8, 1990, pp 124-128.

<sup>26</sup> Craig Buckley, *Graphic Assembly: Montage, Media, and Experimental Architecture in the 1960s*, University of Minnesota Press, 2019.

<sup>27</sup> Hans Hollein, ‘Back to Architecture’ [1962], op cit, p 32.

<sup>28</sup> Charles Jencks, ‘The Supersensualists, Part II’, in *Architectural Design*, no 1, 1971, pp 18-21.

<sup>29</sup> Hans Hollein, ‘Alles ist Architektur’, op cit.

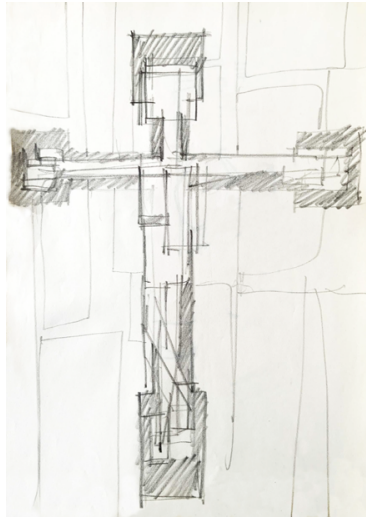


Fig. 5 Hans Hollein, No title, n.d. [1958-1959] (Family Archive, Vienna).



Fig. 6 Hans Hollein, Drawing, 1960 (Family Archive, Vienna).

Fig. 7 Hans Hollein, *Space in Space in Space*, 1960 (Architekturzentrum Wien).



ALLES IST ARCHITEKTUR

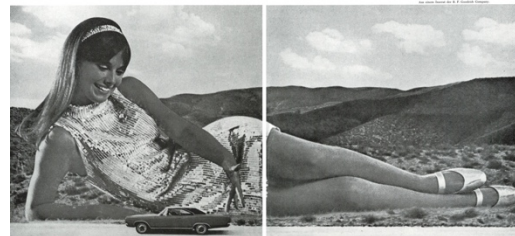


Fig. 8 Hans Hollein, Superstructure above Salzburg, 1960 (Architekturzentrum Wien).

Fig. 9 Hans Hollein, 'Alles ist Architektur', in *Bau. Schrift für Architektur und Umwelt*, no 1-2, 1968, pp 6-7.

## The Bodybuilding

More than any paper projects, another type of graphic representation conceived in the early 1970s on occasion of an exhibition at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum encapsulated the value of the body in Hollein's unique interpretation of design. No longer transfigured into a building or an urban structure, the body was elevated to the foundational concept of a method capable of guiding architectural design according to a principle of abstraction. The paper project was a mental map, which placed the body at the centre of considerations related to space organisation, behaviour, living tools, and politics, demonstrating the centrality of bodies interacting in space (Fig. 10). The map's anatomical focus encompassed not only typical body features but also 'mutilations' and 'deformations'. It highlighted the body's different stages of life and ages, and its complex nature, extending to the enhancement of the body, transforming it into a 'cyborg' or 'automat'. These transformations dictated the configuration and character of the body's shelters and projections, becoming nothing else than extensions of the body itself, evolving into 'bodybuilding', as explained in the map. Far from a mere metaphor, 'bodybuilding' was a fundamental concept carrying a dual resonance: it referenced both the physical act of creating structures and the conceptual process of conceiving spaces as living organisms. The 'building', having assumed a 'body' configuration after several human figure forms, is imbued with its own life cycle, including phases of birth, use, transformation, consumption, and death. 'We must allow it to die', Hollein asserted, referring to the building.<sup>30</sup> This particular view emphasises the necessity of accepting decay, obsolescence and regeneration as integral to the architectural process, beyond any timeless permanence. This underscores the precise understanding of architecture at the dawn of postmodernity, when it went beyond a static entity to be instead conceived as a dynamic, living being that both welcomes and generates life. The 'bodybuilding', like the bodies it serves, possesses a life cycle itself, hinting at the possibility of spiritual and carnal regeneration, reflecting the complexities and possibilities of human and transcendental existence. This is precisely the lesson Hollein derived from the body of Christ and the female body, suggesting that architecture, like these bodies, is capable of embodying life, transformation and renewal.

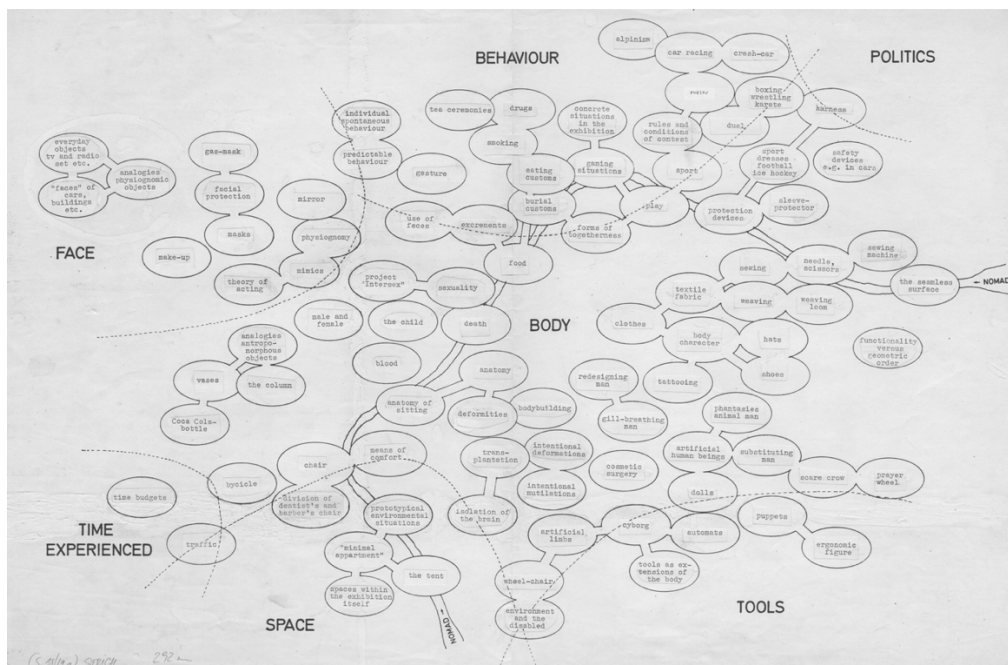


Fig. 10 Hans Hollein, Drawing, n.d. (Family Archive, Vienna).

<sup>30</sup> Hans Hollein, 'Back to Architecture' [1962], op cit, p 33.