

## **Transgression: Body and Space**

### **Editorial Introduction**

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### **Maintext**

‘Every rule, limit, boundary or edge carries with it its own fracture, penetration or impulse to disobey.’ Chris Jenks [1]

The theme of “Transgression: body and space” emerges from a vigorous series of research activities, publications and events (herein entitled the Transgression project) that were undertaken between 2010 and 2014 at the School of Architecture, University of the West of England (UWE), Bristol [2]. The term transgression was conceived as a valuable lens through which to investigate architecture and culture in ways that challenge accepted practices, orders and norms. The research reached a critical point of investigation through Transgression: the 10<sup>th</sup> international conference of the Architecture and Humanities Research Association hosted by UWE in 2013 [3]. The breadth of papers from this event are summarized in the Critiques book *Transgression: towards an expanded field of architecture* [4].

This issue of *Architecture and Culture* was seen as an opportunity to investigate one emerging theme from the Transgression project in more depth. Situated within the editors’ own critical research and practice, as well as many conference presentations, was a consideration of the relationship between the body and space, and the way in which accepted relationships between the two might be transgressed, or understood through transgression [5]. This issue of *Architecture and Culture* is therefore presented as a series of dialogues around that theme. It draws from an international range of authors, some of whom developed their thinking at the AHRA Transgression conference, others of whom have been working independently. Research investigations include film, art, photo essay, critical essay, manifesto and polemic, which are curated to present a rich and deep reading of transgression: body and space.

Each of the authors addresses ideas of transgression/body/space in different and distinctive ways. Between them, their papers consider the body in its physical, political, phenomenological, philosophical and poetic guises, ranging from where the body (and the consciousness which resides within it) is located, to what we do with our bodies. The consequences of considering such issues are, spatially, profound – embracing both the very private/personal matters of listening and looking to the very public/collective realm of the spectacle and the power structures which govern how we deport ourselves. Through these papers we investigate the many dimensions of what it is to be human, largely around an exploration of boundaries (physical,

imagined, cultural, representational) and the implications this has for architectural and spatial practice. It is no coincidence that the essays within this issue are written largely in the first person, locating the authors as a conscious, almost physical presence within the issue. This introduction concludes with a series of questions, insights and critical arguments that deepen our understanding of architecture and the culture of which it is a part.

### **Transgression**

Transgression means to go across or beyond accepted practices, laws or conventions. It implies action, coming from the Latin ‘trans’, meaning *across* or *through* and ‘gradi’ (or ‘gressus’ in the past participle) meaning *to walk* or *go*. However, it also hints at more than simply ‘*walking across*’ or ‘*going through*’: it implies aberrant behavior; a breach of what is normal, standard or accepted practice. Perhaps a more accurate definition might be, then, that to transgress is to *challenge, provoke or subvert accepted limits*. Transgression therefore suggests a radical position: it is naughty, subversive and excessive; however, it also implies renewal and creativity, as the outsider position inherently leads to new and alternative ways of seeing, understanding and being. Transgression can be seen as an inherently critical practice (6), and a ‘dynamic force in cultural reproduction’ (7).

Whilst the aberrant nature of transgression implies bad behavior, the act in itself is not inherently good or bad; it is society which brands it one way or the other. This categorization is dependent entirely on the context in which it is understood. For example, to undertake a homosexual act would have been considered a transgression in early 20<sup>th</sup> century UK, whereas in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century (at least in the UK) it would be accepted behavior. This also highlights the way in which transgressive acts *can* ultimately come to be assimilated into the norm. The change is not always in this direction, however. Some behavior (murder for example) remains firmly outside of society’s rules, whereas other actions that were previously accepted (racist behavior, for example) become unacceptable. The act itself does not change, only society’s perception of it. What is important from this understanding, is that transgression allows us to query our values, to consider how things should or could be, rather than accepting things as they are. It suggests a questioning of the norm: of accepted ways of doing things, including architectural practice and understanding; accepted cultural norms; or accepted understandings of the body. Again, this reinforces transgression as a critical project.

As a concept, transgression has its roots in the early twentieth century writings of Georges Bataille, Guy Debord and Mikhail Bakhtin (8) among others, and subsequently Michel Foucault (9). More recently it has re-emerged in the arts, humanities and social sciences as an important post-modern topic through the work of Peter Stallybrass & Allon White, John Jervis, and Chris Jenks (10). However, it was not until 1976 that transgression was first explored in an architectural context, in an essay by Bernard Tschumi entitled ‘Architecture and Transgression’ (11). In this essay, Tschumi proposed that architecture inhabits an impossible location in that it is both a product of the mind (a dematerialized and conceptual undertaking) *and* a ‘sensual experience of space and... a spatial praxis’ (12). Tschumi argued that it is impossible to simultaneously understand something conceptually *and* experientially – as a conceptual understanding is a construct that is inherently removed from real, subjective experience. However, he proposes that since both these elements clearly do

co-exist within built architectural projects, there is an inherent paradox. For Tschumi, this implies that since the paradoxical oppositions are denied, architecture is inherently transgressive; architecture necessarily breaks or goes beyond accepted limits, in this case by contradicting a perceived paradox (13).

The Transgression project expanded Tschumi's tight reading to explore other loci of the subject in relation to architecture. These have included: architectural intent; the role of the architect; the architectural process; and the architectural output (14); as well as an investigation of transgression in the context of the city. These inquiries, in turn, generated a further set of investigations around notions of liminality and ambiguity, power and resistance.

### **Liminality and Ambiguity**

A study of transgression is inherently a study of boundaries, and the ways in which they might be challenged, subverted and even repositioned. However, those boundaries are not without thickness or even ambiguity. The bodily act of stepping across implies a location that is at once neither here nor there; it is in both places at simultaneously, and therefore inhabits a distinct quality of between-ness. Through transgression one is both excluded from, and yet defined by, the structure that defines the transgression. Transgression is therefore about liminality and ambiguity— about occupying a place that is perhaps uncertain and *other* (15).

The critical review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1850 novel *The Scarlet Letter* by this issue's editors, **David Littlefield** and **Rachel Sara**, explores these themes of liminality, ambiguity and in-between-ness. Ostensibly a novel about a crime and its punishment, a sexual transgression resulting in the life-long shaming of the principal character, the book is also a complex investigation into the spaces between states. The protagonists of the story inhabit a world between wildernesses and a culture of hypocrisy and double-meanings. Further, Hawthorne poses moral conundrums, including the fact that a child conceived by an unnamed father can be, also, a thing of truth and beauty. [16]. Hawthorne even appears to enjoy the ambiguities he weaves, creating an uncertain and unreliable narrator, deploying inference and suggestion rather than incontrovertible fact, and leaving the reader to wonder at the uncertainty of language itself. Clearly, within the stated framework of the book, the scarlet letter itself signified "adultery"; but the A can represent so much more. The book, then, is a useful resource through which to explore transgression and the many related terms which come within its compass: ideas of liminality and ambiguity; the freedom and empowerment of the outsider position and the carnival. Moreover, the book suggests that there are no clear divisions between spatial, moral and cultural territories. The boundaries, rather, are moot – porous, indeterminate spaces. Other novels, of course, would have served as productive reference points (Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, perhaps, Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* possibly, JG Ballard's *High Rise* certainly, or Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* – reviewed in issue 1 of A+C). [17]. *The Scarlet Letter*, though, is arguably more nuanced than these others, and certainly deals with the principal themes of this journal (transgression, body, space) in multiple ways. The book, well known in the USA, is a useful point of reference in terms of transgression and how we might understand the role it plays in cultural production.

**Mary Modeen**, who explores the “aesthetics of indeterminacy”, in relation to both the body and architecture, develops this theme of uncertainty. Modeen describes how art practice has come to query the idea of the body’s edge and the notion of the location of the self as being contained within a finite space – the definitive body. Indeed, as Modeen points out, a true self-portrait (one produced by looking at yourself, rather than at a reflection of yourself) would be a depiction that excludes the head. Such art-based, depiction-related observations are, in fact, echoed in science – the location of the self and the range of the body map in particular. The sensory system of a sightless person, for example, can include the tip of a white cane; one could argue, though, that the cane is not just an extension of the body, but that it is intrinsically *part of* the body (18). Modeen sets out a compelling case for exploring the depictive consequences of this question of indeterminacy, of a sort of porous or ambiguous body edge, and its application to architecture. If, she asks, architecture is a discipline which describes, defines and captures space, how precise do the edges of spaces have to be? What sort of architecture might emerge from an appropriation of the indeterminate?

**Ken Wilder** sets out how such an indeterminacy manifests itself in the realm of film and filmic installation – specifically in projected, moving images of the body in space. Wilder describes how the projected image, where image and the mechanics of projection are both part of the work, can be unsettling – disturbing, even. The filmic body, in the cases he outlines, can accrue a very real presence and the edge between the space inhabited by the viewer and the space inhabited by the projected body begins to dissolve. In Wilder’s work, and in the work he references, the relationship between the viewer and viewed becomes more complex than the conventional experience of cinema, where the audience conveniently forgets/ignores the means of production. In addition, the viewer is reminded of their own presence within the composition, suggesting a zone not unlike Tschumi’s paradox in architecture, in which the experience of space and the conceptual intent co-exist (which for Tschumi makes the work inherently transgressive).

### **Power and Resistance**

The Transgression project’s analysis of transgression in the city as apparent in acts of protest, occupation, conflict and resistance led to an investigation of informal settlements, the occupy movement, riots, carnivals, graffiti and skateboarding. These studies framed transgression as fundamentally empowering. By bodily occupying space, these ‘transgressions challenge the dominant power relations: the power to control a city; the power to control humans; to inflict ones will; to subjugate others; to own space.’(17) This highlights the potentially political, subversive act of inhabiting space.

This edition of A+C is “book-ended”, flanked, by two photographic essays, beginning with work by **Emma Critchley** and ending in a photo essay by **Ben Stringer** and **Jane McAllister**. The former depicts the isolated body, devoid of context. Critchley’s work captures the body in space (almost the non-space of the void) and explores the idea of the suspended, floating body – the phenomenological experience of being just a body and, therefore, somehow dis-embodied. The context of no context becomes a place for distortion and bodily possibility. Stringer and McAllister’s work, on the other hand, depicts bodies within a very particular context – the tourist zones of the Spanish island of Mallorca. Here, too, the body is subjected to distortions, but of

another kind – the carnival atmosphere and culture of the crowd results in the costumed body, the naked body, the amalgamated body, the comic body and the inebriated body. Here, in Magaluf, the body of spectacle becomes translated into the absurd individual/collective body. Significantly, the relationship between occupant and context is profound, as the carnivalesque and ‘other’ world-ness of Magaluf is itself an opportunity for an empowering expression of the struggle between being lost in the crowd and expressing one’s individuality.

**Gascia Ouzounian** and **Sarah Lappin**, however, explore the realm of the body through a sharp focus on one sense in particular – hearing. By deploying the framework of the manifesto, the authors propose the role of sound in identifying and understanding space – and more particularly, the role of listening. Through considering *ways of listening* (such as “listening deeply” or “listening thickly”) Ouzounian and Lappin present the idea of the soundscape and its role as a dimension within wider human experience. The case for resistance of the “ocular-centric” position of architecture has been well made, but this manifesto (and taxonomy of listening modes) is an important contribution to the way in which architecture can move beyond the largely visual realm.

**Nora Wendl** offers an alternative critique of visual privilege through her examination of the house Dr Edith Farnsworth commissioned from Mies van der Rohe, completed in 1951. As an architectural icon and historic landmark, the Farnsworth house is lodged firmly in the architectural psyche; Dr Farnsworth’s experience of inhabiting this extraordinary house, however, is less well known. Indeed, Wendl looks to the client’s photographs and poetry to discuss what it might have been like to live in this environment of transparency, reflectivity, luminosity and the beguiling ambiguities which are the characteristics of glass. For Wendl, this exploration is more than desk-based research; rather, her paper is the result of a complex process which included an attempt to inhabit projections of Farnsworth’s images. In living through these images, by locating her own body within the projection, Wendl attempts to better understand the meanings contained within the client’s collections of unpublished poetry. Wendl finds herself occupying a liminal zone (a theme which recurs throughout this issue of A+C), confronting forms that appear to be neither here nor there. By placing her own body into the projections and therefore into the historical interpretation, again Wendl seems to inhabit Tschumi’s paradoxical position at the congruence of concept (which might be seen as a more traditional historical interpretation of the house) and experience (which allows the experiences of Wendl herself, as well as Farnsworth to interpret the house). Inhabiting the Farnsworth house, and inhabiting the fragments which record the original inhabitation, is one of uncertainty. This uncertain location, however, provides an empowered reading – Wendl has actively positioned herself as a part of the Farnsworth house’s history, whilst simultaneously challenging the power structures in which concept (and the role of architect) trumps experience (and the role of client).

**Nicole Kalms** presents a more overtly political, feminist critique of body and space. Kalms investigates the image of women as objects, but here the image is an overtly sexualised one – and one which, importantly, leaps from the two-dimensional realm into a visceral one of pornographic bodily presence. Kalms explores how the Playboy aesthetic of women as playthings has moved from the pages of magazines and “gentlemen’s clubs” into the flesh and blood High Street enterprises of topless

carwashes and, effectively, tempting and demeaning ‘samples’ of what is available elsewhere. Wendle rejects the post-feminist position (which might be characterised as one of self-conscious empowerment, choice or even irony) and offers a clear challenge to what she sees as a provocation - an emerging norm of “[Hyper] Sexualized City”. Here it is perhaps that the transgression has become normalized, or assimilated that is pertinent. Once the activity ceases to be naughty, excessive or subversive, it loses its place as an act of resistance to the power of the ‘norm’ and becomes therefore more problematic. In this case the locus of power is in the hands of the commercial organisations, and none with the women and men who are nonetheless impacted by the presentation of real women as sexual playthings.

## **Conclusion**

The Transgression project which began at the University of the West of England in 2010 has come to consider the term *transgression* as less of a boundary which one crosses (a limit beyond which one ought not to venture) and more of a boundary line which has width. The border is fuzzy, porous and indeterminate, and there is much to be learned not only from crossing from one territory to another but through exploring the liminal condition between the two. The papers within this edition of A+C discuss not only the polarity of two states, but the act of moving between them – that in-between moment of inhabiting the dissolve, or gap, which separates where one is, from where one might be.

Transgression, then, reminds us of our own bodily presence within readings of architecture and culture and challenges us to question how we might define the body; where does it begin and end? Is locating the body in readings of architecture and culture inherently transgressive? As architects and spatial practitioners how might we actively locate ourselves as ‘outsiders’ and ‘others’ in order to look at our practices anew? Transgression inhabits a place that is somewhere between the space of the body and the space of culture. Through transgression we may establish a way of seeing that is itself ambiguous and indeterminate, that has the freedoms associated with sitting outside of, whilst also referencing that which is within; in those qualities we can find a way of understanding that transgression is politically empowering, and critically creative.

[END OF MAIN TEXT. NOTES AND REFERENCE FOLLOW]

[1] Chris Jenks ‘Transgression the Concept’, in in Jonathan Mosley and Rachel Sara (eds), 2013, *The Architecture of Transgression AD*, Wiley: London, 21

[2] On 22 February 2010 the Architectural Humanities Research Association called for “expressions of interest” from universities seeking to host one of AHRA’s international conferences. That call prompted a vigorous and on-going conversation among research-active staff within UWE’s Department of Architecture and the Built Environment (then the Department of Planning and Architecture). Staff including Rachel Sara, David Littlefield, Louis Rice, Jonathan Mosley, James Burch, Mike Devereux and Thom Gorst looked to see where their research interests overlapped or coincided. Those original conversations – which quickly began to focus on terms such as boundaries, liminality, rogue, alternative, un/authorised and territory – coalesced around agreement that transgression was precise enough to suggest the attitude and

tone of our research, but loose enough to encompass the broad scope of our interests sufficiently well. This on-going conversation on the subject of Transgression has led to a series of outcomes beyond that conference and this journal, including:

- an exhibition at Bristol's Architecture Centre (accompanied by the book *Architecture + Transgression*, published by the Architecture Centre, edited by Louis Rice. 2012)

- "The Architecture of Transgression", an edition of *Architectural Design* (Wiley, Nov/Dec 2013) edited by Rachel Sara and Jonathan Mosley

- *Transgression: towards an expanded field of architecture*, edited by Louis Rice and David Littlefield, a peer reviewed book within the "Critiques" series (Routledge, November 2014)

[3] Transgression: the 10<sup>th</sup> international conference of the Architecture and Humanities Research Association hosted by UWE, Bristol, 21-23 November 2013

[4] Louis Rice and David Littlefield (eds) *Transgression: towards an expanded field of architecture* Routledge Critiques series 2014

[5] Rachel Sara 'Between Architecture and Dance', in Vicky Hunter, *Moving Sites*, Routledge: London, due to be published 2015

[6] See for example Jane Rendell, Jonathan Hill, Mark Dorrian, and Murray Fraser (Eds) *Critical Architecture* (Critiques), Routledge: 2007

[7] Chris Jenks, Transgression the concept, in Jonathan Mosley and Rachel Sara (eds), 2013, *The Architecture of Transgression AD*, Wiley: London, 21

[8] See Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939* (trans. A. Stoekl), Manchester University Press (Manchester), 1985, and Georges Bataille, *Eroticism, City Lights* (London), 1986; Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith Cambridge, Mass: Zone books, 1994; Mikhael Bathkin, *Rabelais and His World*, Trans. Iswolsky, H, (1984) Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

[9] Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (contains the 1963 essay 'Preface to transgression'), M Foucault - 1977 - New York: Cornell University Press

[10] See Peter Stallybrass & Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Methuen (London), 1986; John Jervis, *Transgressing the Modern: Explorations in the Western Experience of Otherness*, Blackwell (Oxford), 1999; Chris Jenks, *Transgression*, Routledge (London), 2003; Chris Jenks, *Cultures of Excess*, University of London Goldsmith College (London), 1996; Chris Jenks, (ed.), *Transgression 4 Vols.*, Routledge (London), 2006

[11] Bernard Tschumi, 'Architecture and Transgression', in Bernard Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction*, MIT Press (Cambridge, Massachusetts), 1996 edition

[12] Bernard Tschumi, 1996:66

[13] Bernard Tschumi, 1996:67

[14] Jonathan Mosley and Rachel Sara “Towards a Destablising Architecture” in Jonathan Mosley and Rachel Sara (eds), 2013, *The Architecture of Transgression AD*, Wiley: London, 15-19.

[15] Indeed Michel Foucault describes that ‘it is likely that transgression has its entire space in the line it crosses’, 'Preface to transgression' in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, M Foucault - 1977 - New York: Cornell University Press. For a discussion of transgression and the position of the other, see John Jervis, *Transgressing the Modern: Explorations in the Western Experience of Otherness*, Blackwell (Oxford), 1999

[16] Uncontentious today, Hawthorne’s novel was daring in its exploration of this subject matter in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century – especially with its setting in 17<sup>th</sup> century Puritan New England.

[17] Edgar Allan Poe’s 1839 story *The Fall of the House of Usher* is a brilliant exploration of the fusion between site and mind, linking the collapse of one with the collapse of the other. Joseph Conrad’s 1899 novella *Heart of Darkness* describes a journey into Belgian Congo in order to locate the elusive Kurtz, a company commander who appears to have set up his own fiefdom on the edges of physical and moral acceptability. JG Ballard’s 1975 novel *High Rise* considers the interplay of building and behaviour in his description of the taboos which are broken by the inhabitants of a new residential tower block – a narrative which includes moments of cannibalism, rape, murder and incest. Margaret Atwood’s 1985 *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a first person account of a woman’s role in a dystopia of puritan values so extreme that moral and ethical values become instruments of oppression and absurdity; this book was reviewed by Stephen Walker in issue 1 of A+C.

[18] A now famous experiment, reported in *New Scientist* in 2009, illustrates how the brain can be fooled into thinking that a rubber glove can quickly be integrated into a person’s sense of self – that it is not just a rubber glove, but a participant’s actual hand. The same magazine has carried an argument by Lambros Malafouris, concerning the boundary between person and world, which argues for a continuity between a sightless person and their white cane: “Think of a blind person with a stick. Where does this person's self begin? See links:

<http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn16809-body-illusions-rubber-hand-illusion.html>

<http://www.newscientist.com/article/mg21929330.200-mind-into-matter-where-we-end-and-the-world-begins.html>

[19] Louis Rice (ed), *architecture+transgression*, The Architecture Centre, Bristol: 2012, 52



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