A Call to Action: The Work of Friedensreich Hundertwasser as Impetus to Contemporary Architectural Discourse

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The small way, mixed media, 1991.

The line I trace with my feet walking to the museum is more important and more beautiful than the lines I find there hung up on the walls.

If tracing the line below foot in an urban excursion can be equated to watching a grand canvas unfold before our eyes—a never-ending art piece comprised of a plethora of medium—it is entirely possible to equate the processes of conceptualizing and articulating the palimpsest upon which the foot traverses to an architecture of mediation between culture and nature. Possibly so, a creative endeavor that trespasses a mere medium of representation. What occurs from point A to point B is the streaming of surface and a tactile interaction with that surface. In urban space that interaction coincides with the man made and the interaction is being read as new space.

Currently, a line of urban theory and active design exploration articulates what these new spaces (or new ways of perceiving these spaces) within the city are. They are rendered as new processes and methods, and a way of categorizing the overlap. In this era of boundary division (quite literally the post-Fordist, post-linear mentality), new terminology is being developed. Divisions in disciplines are blurring. It is happening within the design fields and it is extending beyond that scope. Terms have come about such as “second skin,” “metaspace” and are used routinely by prominent theorists and designers. One such theorist, Raoul Bunschoten explains these metaspace as the earth being comprised of skins to contain human dwelling. Cities are labeled “second skin”. Such contemporaries explain these terms and view larger scale infrastructure to not only what is man made such as the transportation systems and buildings but also that which is natural and biological and how the two seemingly separate entities in fact work simultaneously together.

Current discussion however is not altogether isolated to contemporary circles. The terminology had a beginning with the work of a somewhat misunderstood artist-turned-amateur-architect, Friedensreich Hundertwasser. Hundertwasser was a painter, first and foremost, and his questions revolved around the ills he perceived Modernism to have cast upon humanity. According to him, the built environment had succumbed to a linear, objectified commodity. No longer were individuals entitled to make spaces as they felt appropriate, they were cattled into a paradigm of an urban utopia, a movement we are beginning to re-examine.

Hundertwasser was an activist figuratively through his artwork, and also literally through writings and demonstrations. In the latter part of his career, he was also an architectural designer and quite prolific. His architectural work, though scorned by critics, attracts masses of admirers. These admirers, outside the scope of architectural discipline, find a playful and happy quality about his buildings. Something speaks to their souls. All the more evident that he was being noticed, by the end of the 20th Century, Hundertwasser was the best-known Austrian artist. And his largest following began upon commencement of his work in physical structure. As true to discourse built upon itself over time by the works and

1 Hundertwasser, 42.
2 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friedensreich_Hundertwasser
thoughts of many predecessors, Hundertwasser literally “unpaved” the contemporary engagement in redefining categorical divisions. However, he is overlooked as the impetus to this discourse.

The Austrian-born Hundertwasser, a painter by training, began meddling in the realm of architecture and planning post-WWII. He was a survivor of many sorts. He was raised by his single mother, his father having died when Hundertwasser was only one year. Sixty-nine Jewish family members, nearly all his maternal family, were deported from Austria and killed in the Holocaust. Historians speculate that this beginning taught Hundertwasser early on that autonomy keeps one alive.

Hundertwasser began studying art at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna in 1948. He quit after three months. He then spent a year traveling in Europe and planted himself in Paris with artist and future collaborator, Rene Bro. What followed were subsequent exhibitions in Vienna and Paris. During that time, he also painted his first spiral, which was to become a symbol and metaphor of his life’s work.

For Hundertwasser, the spiral was representational of layering within humanity and the individual, as well as that of our physical world. Within both the societal (culture) and physical (nature), a rich weaving begins to reveal itself, blurring boundaries and opening up the possibilities of synthesis of form and use. The spiral also reveals that there can be no clear distinction.

Within this train of thought, Hundertwasser began to explore the concept of public presence within creating. He abhorred the academic elitists, the very group to become his most fervent opponents. He also believed the educational system was at fault for producing illiteracy in creation. His theory of transautomatism was a criticism on one hand of the public’s perceptive illiteracy and also an affirmation of the necessity for creative involvement by that public in the work of art.

The creative impotence of the individual having become totally out of hand, as expressed by standardization, socialization, copying, linearization, ant-ification, sterilization, and dosisation, a new and terrible illiteracy has developed. The responsibility for this lies with the criminal methodology of our system of instruction as practiced in the universities, academies, finishing schools, and schools. The systemic and counternatural learning, studying, and copying of alien knowledge is performed hand in hand with the systemic killing of the will to shape and create things.

Fig.2 A Raindrop Which Falls into the City, watercolor, 1955.

3 Hundertwasser, 304.
4 Restany, 11.
5 Ibid, 305.
6 Restany, 21.
The people produced by such education are incapable of assuming the intended responsibility for themselves and us all.\(^7\)

Much education of the 20\(^{th}\) Century did little to produce creative initiative. Students were trained to sit at their desks (future cubicles and factory lines) and do what was told. Value was placed on statistical rankings -- not by the merit of character nor the virtues of personality. Clearly so, there was a devastating effect rendered on the individual. No matter a socialist scene or a capitalist, the individual was rendered obsolete.

From this stance birthed the Pintorium, an ideal universal academy, “halfway between the urinal and the picture-gallery,” which would assemble all the trends symbolized by the extreme visionary diversity of its three founders, Hundertwasser, fantastic realist Ernst Fuchs, and the action tachist Arnulf Rainier.\(^8\) The three utilized this organization as an educational tool while also pooling artistic resources.

The Pintorium is not a school of painting, but especially a school of thinking and life, as well. The Pintorium is a spiritual plateau headed by a pintorection, which is entitled to assign chairs to a number of highly qualified creative people. However, these chairs are not intended for instruction, but for creative, autonomous concentration. They are rocking chairs whose function is similar to those of bathtubs and prayer stools. The Pintorium is home to all creative persons without discrimination as to arts, artistic persuasion and philosophy, architecture, poetry, film, music, etc.\(^9\)

The formation of the Pintorium coincided with Hundertwasser’s proclamation of his theses: "My theses are: mould and its theory. The renewal of architecture by rot. The putrefaction of rational architecture."\(^10\) Hundertwasser’s production of paintings visualized a new way of city-building and architecture, a process of unfolding and retracing lines and reintroducing nature into the city and allowing this nature to share the same status as the manmade.

With these theses, Hundertwasser advocated that without an individuals’ right to build, Modern architecture could not be considered art. He compared the architecture of the mid-20\(^{th}\) Century to the paintings of the Soviet Union, “all that has been achieved are detached and pitiful compromises by men of bad conscience who work with straight-edged

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\(^7\) Hundertwasser, 50.  
\(^8\) Restany, 24.  
\(^9\) Hundertwasser, 50.  
\(^10\) Restany, 24.
Hundertwasser also felt that existence within spaces of rational architecture was more detrimental to humankind than those of slums.

The tangible and material inhabitability of slums is preferable to the moral unhabitability of utilitarian, functional architecture. In the so-called slums only the human body can be oppressed, but in our modern functional architecture, allegedly constructed for the human being, man’s soul is perishing, oppressed. We should instead adopt as the starting point for improvement the slum principle, that is, wildly luxuriantly growing architecture, not functional architecture.12

Hundertwasser’s ‘actions’ were always purely intuitive, spontaneous, non-premeditated, motivated by the sense of a truth, always the same: his hatred (symbolized by the straight line and its spiral antithesis) of rationalism in all its domains and particularly in the one that most directly conditions the individual—the structuring of his habitat and determinations of his way of life.13

### LOOS AS TARGET

Hundertwasser’s immediate critical reactions of rationalism were directed towards the writing of Adolf Loos. Most specifically was Loos’ “Ornament and Crime” published in 1908. Loos advocated a radical aesthetic purism. Loos abhorred ornamentation. He insisted that the evolution of culture was synonymous with the removal of ornament from utilitarian objects.14 Loos purported that “ornament is wasted labor power and hence wasted health.”

What Hundertwasser again advocated, while not just a mere oversight on Loos’ behalf but a crime in return, was this mentality that the individual lay person had no right to manipulate his environment. Hundertwasser’s direct response to Loos was written in his “Architecture-Boycott Manifesto” in 198 and directed towards his work in Vienna.

There is another, very important reason why I choose Vienna to attack this evil-box prison mischief, namely because I am Austrian, which gives me the moral obligation to do so. For it was from Austria that this architectural crime was launched into the world. It is thus from Austria that reparations must come. The Austrian Adolf Loos brought this atrocity into the world. In 1908, with his manifesto aptly titled “Ornament and Crime”. No doubt he meant well. Adolf Hitler meant well, too. But Adolf Loos was incapable of thinking fifty years ahead. The world will never be rid of the evil he invoked.16

The “decoration” that Loos so adamantly rejected, Hundertwasser equated to individual right to creative expression. Hundertwasser held protest demonstrations to provoke response and to initiate action. One such of these was a demonstration in which he splattered paint on the ceiling of a university building interior while in the nude. In this demonstration, he called for the individual’s right to a third skin and the right to alter interiors.

From Speech in the Nude for the Right to a Third Skin

We live in buildings which are criminal and which were built by architects who are really criminals. And I can prove that. If you stunt a child’s growth, it is something very similar. There are child prodigies they give pills to so they stay small. That is a criminal act: so they stay that small and don’t get bigger. Architecture should not start growing until people move in and vice versa.17

11 Hundertwasser, 46.
12 Ibid, 46.
13 Restany, 17.
14 Loos, 20.
15 Ibid, 22.
16 Hundertwasser, 58.
17 Ibid, 54.
I cannot understand that people live in these prisons – I keep coming back to this – and don’t rebel against them. It would be so simple; after all, they only need to paint something around the windows or put in some mosaics. The younger generation is already doing this. It won’t go along with it. They can’t change architecture yet, for they are not permitted to do so. There is an authority for that which prevents this no matter what. Only some architects or others with diplomas may do anything. And these architects, like everybody who has gone to the university, are so over-educated. By virtue of the machinery they have been through they are no longer capable of conceiving an idea on their own. They are legally qualified but are totally incapable of thinking creatively and these people are responsible for us all.  

THE SKINS, AND OTHER THOUGHTS

As Corbusier had his five points of architecture, so Hundertwasser had his skins. He also had purported window rights and tree tenants. Hundertwasser advocated the idea that our reality is comprised of skins: first skin, epidermis; second skin, clothing; third skin, houses; fourth skin, identity; and the fifth skin, the Earth. These skins are his spiral circling from his navel outward, and the pictorial symbol illustrates the biological metaphor. When in 1967 and 1968 the artist delivered his “Naked” address to proclaim man’s right to his third skin (the free alteration of his house). He re-found his first skin, that of his original truth, his nakedness as a man and painter by stripping off his second skin (his clothes) to proclaim the right to his third skin (his home).

How these skins are literally and figuratively connected is the method Hundertwasser uses to justify his argument to individual rights and environmental activism. A large component of his vision seeks to regain beauty, something he felt had been taken from humanity by way of the alternative prerogatives.

So begins the path to happiness in beauty, though the real road lies beyond, when the organic and the elementary are re-entered. It is through this passage that the perceptive individual attains to use of his or her right to creation. The right to creation is a universal one, and we can all possess it, provided we deserve it. That is why society is criminal: by the education that it gives us, it arouses reflexautomatisms that cause us to live badly in our second and third skins, by distracting us from our real purpose, which is to live well.  

The secondary ideas of window rights and tree tenants came as active possibilities of helping ease the sterility and bleakness of Modern architecture. Within both the rights of the window and the hope for tree tenants, there is a blatant dialectic that begins to speak to the environmental, back-to-roots movement of the late 60s and early 70s. Hundertwasser claimed that the window right was not the elitist privilege of the artist or architect. It is a right which Hundertwasser demanded for everyone. Everyone living in his houses should be entitled to it, and more: people everywhere in the world should be allowed to exercise it. This participation by everyone could be the nucleus of a new, “organic” architecture, in the sense of the oft-cited dictum of Lautreamont that poetry must be made by everyone.

He would like to be able to lean out the window and be allowed to paint everything in arm’s and brush’s reach in bright colors. So that everybody who passes by can see at a glance that somebody lives there. Somebody lives there who is different from everybody else. And so the hurrying passer-by pauses a moment and sympathizes with the fate of the person living on the other side of the window. The window right is not the elitist privilege of the artist or architect. It is a right, which Hundertwasser demands for everyone.
For the tree tenant, Hundertwasser defined a list of points clearly supporting the benefits of integrating trees within building structures themselves. He believed that trees could be treated as equals to the human tenants. And in exchange for their use of space, they would pay back landowners as well as fellow tenants by way of exchange.

1. Tree tenants create oxygen.
2. Tree tenants improve the city climate and the well being of dwellers. They bring the needed moisture into the desert climate of the city, reduce the dry-humid and the cold-warm contrast.
3. Tree tenants act like vacuum cleaners and more. They swallow even the finest and poisonous dust. There is less dust in the apartment and in the street.
4. Tree tenants swallow noise. They reduce the echoes of the city noise and create quietness.
5. Tree tenants protect you like curtains from the outside view and create shelter.
6. Tree tenants give shadow in the summer but let sunlight through in the winter when the leaves have fallen.
7. Butterflies and birds come back.
8. Beauty and joy of life come back. Living quality is improved by having a piece of nature of one’s own.
9. The tree tenant is a symbol or reparation towards nature which is extremely visible. We restore to nature a tiny piece of the huge territories which man has taken away from nature illegally.23

The tree tenant would move in between floors of human occupants and the building itself would begin to turn into its own miniature biosphere. The exchange would also benefit those on the exterior of the structure by contributing to air quality as well as the greening of the street scape.

Fig. 5 First Draft of Tree Tenant, water color on typing paper, 1973.
While both the window rights and tree tenant proposals seemed radical in the time that Hundertwasser was writing, lecturing, and beginning to secure opportunities of realizing built form, it appears that his ideas informed a future generation of designers and theorists. His method of conceptualizing skins had a direct relation to the way that several contemporary theorists postulate a method for understanding how we re-examine the spaces we inhabit. In addition, how these spaces relate to one another and how the man made infrastructure informs and possibly works side by side (or has the potential to do so) with that of the natural, seems obvious. Perhaps his popularity with actual users of the space spoke to the dreams of youth. Perhaps he tapped into basic truths of malleable minds and these minds kept sight of Hundertwasser’s vision. Now, in the first decade of the 21st Century, his work is being usurped by academics, namely Raoul Bunschoten and Edward Soja, and firms such as MVRDV, in pursuit of explaining an ever-increasing realization that we can no longer design objects, but rather design is informed and moves through networks. We have realized that everything is connected.

The work of landscape architect and theorist Raoul Bunschoten has referred to the theory of a second and third skin of human dwelling. Bunschoten calls these spaces metaspaces and assigns them to what he calls the urban gallery. When a part of a city is designated a metaspace, it becomes an urban gallery – a fluid form of public space that evolves in time, generating different definitions of public space and different ways of participating in it. These definitions yield ‘floors’ in the spatial structure of the urban gallery. Metaspaces make it possible to bring the dynamic structure of scenarios into the flows of the second skin. A metaspace in the second skin is a public space, a public matrix.

Bunschoten also firmly believes that the city has emotions and these emotions interact within the skin, and in effect, the public matrix.

Bunschoten also argues that the practices of urban planning and architecture are evolving in the context of an ever-more complex second skin. Not isolated from this is the emotion of the city and the overlap of disciplinary boundaries. In collaboration with other practices, inhabitants, users, clients, decision makers, producers, and investors, these practitioners help to invent new urban forms and define the shifts in practice that are required for the management of these new forms. He has proposed that urban curators, a new hybrid profession, orchestrate this shift in practice, detect emergent phenomena, designate cities as metaspaces, form galleries, and curate their contents. In essence, they bring all the pieces together, listening to the needs of the stakeholders, while also understanding the shifts of the natural components. The following is Bunschoten’s method for visualizing this phenomenon, much like Hundertwasser’s list of tree tenant perks.

0. The skin of the earth wraps the earth.
1. Cities form the second skin.
2. The dynamics of the earth affect the second skin.
3. The increasing complexity of the second skin calls for the definition of new practice – and with it a new tool box – for the construction and management of cities.
4. Like the earth’s skin, cities are plastic environments that undergo constant change. Geological forces causes changes in the skin of the earth. What forces cause changes in the second skin?
5. A city is a life form. It has emotions.
6. To understand the second skin as a dynamic environment requires an awareness of its emotions. The emotions of the city are called proto-urban conditions.
7. Proto-urban conditions agitate the second skin.
8. Proto-urban conditions change cause in the incessant flux of the second skin, to bring about new phenomena that seem to follow lines drawn upon an invisible map – a map that prescribes the behavior of cities.
9. The city as a life form has to be maintained – its evolution sustained. To do so, proto-urban conditions must be known, their manifestations recognized: The drone of the traffic disturbs the quiet; the wind blows through the trees, taking the leaves; lust determines the behavior of the afternoon exchange dealings – the Dow Jones is up; fear and desire permeate the night; alarm systems go off. The chat rooms of the Internet are full of people pretending they are not themselves, other genders. Memory becomes a toponymy: here was once a church; now only the name remains.
10. How to see? New phenomena need new eyes.
11. Immersion in the city with new eyes means walking through it, entering its flux, encountering emergent phenomena.

24 Bunschoten, 55.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid, 57.
recognizing them as manifestations of proto-urban conditions, sorting them into boxes. 12. Boxes need labels. New phenomena need caretakers.\textsuperscript{27}

While Bunschoten argues that the city has emotions, which can be equated to the underlying infrastructural and social collective of inhabitants, Hundertwasser was arguing for the rights of the individual soul towards a more humane existence for the whole.

In a recent book published by renowned urbanist Edward Soja, the picture gracing the front cover is none other than Hundertwasser’s painting, “The Small Way”. The book, titled “Postmetropolis” examines traditional sociological and urban design critiques of the American city, which Soja argues have left vacant a wide middle ground of critical enquiry. Between statistical analysis and physical critique, Soja attempts to bridge the divide by proposing a ‘third way’ for urban studies. The result is a broad overview, ranging between sociological and cultural points of view, with the provocative possibility of pairing the two in a new urban paradigm.

Soja does not wish to simply dismiss modernism but to construct a critical tension between postmodernism and modernism out of which will emerge a new synthesis-this is the domain of thirdspace where simplistic antagonistic dualism are transcended. Thirspace builds upon firstspace, where history and the social are dominant and the spatial is peripheral, and secondspace, which stresses that reality be understood via ‘imagined representations’; it is the domain in which spatiality comes into its own as a genuinely constitutive element in the structuring of the world.

Again, Hundertwasser’s skins relate to Soja’s understanding of firstspace, secondspace and thirdspace. There is clearly reference to a predecessor.

Also applicable is the work of the Dutch firm, MVRDV. MVRDV has situated itself between philosophy, theory and practice. Much to their credit, they have taken an extreme stance on environmentalism and made it sexy and provocative. They also offer solutions to integrating the natural with the cultural and they are well received. Their work, stemming from theory, goes one step further than Soja to offer actual possibilities such as Hundertwasser’s window rights and tree tenants. Unbelievably similar in many ways to design proposals by Hundertwasser, their proposals are begin realized in real built form.
Fig. 7 MVRDV, “3-D Garden”, Hengelo, The Netherlands, 2001.

Fig. 10 Hundertwasser House, public housing corner of Lowengasse/Kegelgasse, Vienna, 1995.
Friedensreich Hundertwasser - artist, activist, eccentric - may not have single-handedly unpaved the modernist mentality of linearity and segregation of the built environment to form and function. However, he was successful in opening awareness before it was fashionable to do so. Through his passionate engagement in questioning the assumptions of the time, he planted a seed for future dialogue and experimentation in alternative ways of perceiving our environment and interacting with it.

I can immediately recognize the danger of a marching column compressed into geometric rectangles, be they the Fascist, communist, or American; similarly, the danger modern architectures designed on the basis of straight lines entail for the people who will unsuspectingly live in them. Also, the danger of millions of identical (standard mass production in America) and the danger of reproducing the same slogans and theses and uniformisation by the million (in the Soviet Union). The problem is very complex, as you know; just so you understand in that way, for example, art and politics can be mixed.”

And while the straight line literally may not lead to the downfall of humanity, there is truth in his statement as analogy. Unless there are those who take an alternative path from those that the majority take, there will never be a possibility of change. This applies at the scale of the built environment just as it applies at political scales. The disciplines can no longer be divided. Our environment takes direct assault from political decisions. Our dwellings effect our growth. And this process goes on ad infinitum.

Friedensreich Hundertwasser did a service to the design profession by beginning to formulate new terminology and concepts. While he stepped out on a limb and was ridiculed, those that have followed have reaped the benefits of his work.
FIGURES

Fig. 1  The Small Way, mixed media, Kaurinui, 1991.

Fig. 2  A Raindrop Which Falls into the City, water color, Paris, 1955.

Fig. 3  Skyscraper on Stilts in the Style of Le Corbusier and Village Church, water color on wrapping paper, Burgeralm, 1951.

Fig. 4  Bleeding Houses, mixed media, Vienna, 1952.

Fig. 5  First Draft of Tree Tenant, water color on typing paper, Vienna, 1973.

Fig. 6  Draft of a façade design for the American Institute of Architecture in Washington D.C., for an educational television program, December 1982. Watercolor and pencil on photograph.

Fig. 7  MVRDV, “3-D Garden”, Hengelo, The Netherlands, 2001.

Fig. 8  The Tyranny of Architecture – The Road to Socialism, mixed media, New Zealand, 1982.

Fig. 9  City Citizen, mixed media, Venedig, 1993.

Fig. 10  Hundertwasser House, public housing corner of Lowengasse/Kegelgasse, Vienna, 1995.

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