

# A r c h i t e x t u r e s

## *Between Skin and Stone*

by *Matina Kousidi*

**Textiles have had a long history within architectural discourse and practice.** Gottfried Semper, 19th century architect and art critic, observed that, in all Germanic languages, the terms 'wall' (wand) and 'garment' (gewand) share the same etymological root. He went on to describe textiles as built surfaces, representing types of 'veiling.' Several contemporary architects have incorporated the element of 'veil' in their designs, such as Shigeru Ban's *Curtain Wall House* (Tokyo, 1995) and Rem Koolhaas's *Maison Lemoine* (Floirac, 1998)—both unfolding an ethereal character of building.

Textiles constitute an interface between the permanent and the vulnerable, the resilient and the delicate, the public and the intimate. Constantly negotiating these qualities, they represent elements that, in the words of Frank Lloyd Wright, bear "attributes of genuine architecture."<sup>1</sup> Artists, such as Christo and Jeanne Claude and Do Ho Suh, have used textiles extensively in their work to convey notions of tactility, intimacy, and domesticity through the prism of the architectural object. Indeed, the realm of the arts provides a fruitful territory for reflecting upon the relationship of the body to the built environment.



SHIGERU BAN *Curtain Wall House* (exterior, day) Tokyo, 1995.  
Interior detail /INSET. Photos: Hiroyuki Hirai. Courtesy of the architect.



ABOVE LEFT: LUCY AND JORGE ORTA  
*Refuge Wear—Intervention London East End* Detail, diptych, original Lamda color photograph laminated on Dibon, 94.4" x 59", 1998.

ABOVE RIGHT: LUCY AND JORGE ORTA  
*Modular Architecture—The Unit x 10* Still from the dance performance *Soirées Nomades*, 1996.

LEFT: LUCY AND JORGE ORTA  
*Modular Architecture—The Dome* Microporous polyester, diverse textiles, zips, telescopic aluminum structure, diptych 118" x 68.6" x 78.74", 1996.  
Photos: John Akehurst.  
Courtesy of the artists.

The medium of textiles widely articulates this reflection, as in the case of the featured artists **Lucy and Jorge Orta**, and **Claudy Jongstra**.

A 1998 picture from the east end of London depicts the ominous *Balfron Tower* (designed by Brutalist style architect Ernö Goldfinger in 1967) looming over a tent from the Ortas' *Refuge Wear* series, a hood, pair of sleeves, and set of trouser legs extruding from each side. The juxtaposition of these two structures—the robust concrete edifice and the compact fabric shelter—reinforces the intimate character of the latter and its direct allusion to the human body. This piece draws characteristics from *Habitent*, a backpack that can be transformed into an overcoat and then a tent. First exhibited in Paris in

1993 to address the city's homeless, it holds the seeds of the artists' reflection on textile dwellings—their own interpretation of "existenzminimum" (subsistence dwelling). As in the bubble-like *Cushicle* (1964) and *Suitaloon* (1967) designs of avant-garde architect Michael Webb, the body is enclosed within a confined autonomous membrane. In the Ortas' case, this coating is made of an aluminum polyamide fabric lined with polar fleece, sewn around a telescopic construction and enhanced by a whistle, lantern, and compass.

Gradually, the Ortas' structures have evolved into modular pieces that can be combined and multiplied, as if following the repetitive logic that generated the Brutalist style of



LUCY AND JORGE ORTA *Fabulae Romanae Spirit—Observer* Felt, canvas, fiberglass, 66.9" x 39.3" x 23.6", 2012. Courtesy of the artists and Ermenegildo Zegna, with the assistance of Mio Jin, Lara Torres, Oliver Ruuger, Sum Yu Li.

building façades. Gloves featured on tent sides could be matched as pairs, uniform's side seams could be zipped to create groups, and life vests could be assembled together to create life chains. Their series *Modular Architecture* and *Nexus Architecture*, comprised of interconnected shelters, emerged later in the 1990s. These works hinted at the etymological origin of the 17th century Latin term *nexus* and the notion of "a binding together." At times, these assemblages approached the scale of the urban fabric, as the *Connector Mobile Village* project suggests, accompanied by tents or longitudinal joints in order to accommodate the body and its minimum belongings. "I wanted to explore the systems that encapsulate individual bodies, and challenge them with a system that connects and interconnects individuals,"<sup>2</sup> Lucy Orta stated. These modular connections signify social ties while new types of proximities are generated: human units appear to hold hands, share common corporeal extensions, and even dwell in the same skin.

These forms are also reminiscent of the geometric textiles traversing the work of German artist Franz Erhard Walther. In particular, his 58-



LUCY AND JORGE ORTA *Fabulae Romanae Spirit—Traveller* Wool, leather, nickel, 62.9" x 59" x 23.6", 2012. Courtesy of the artists and Ermenegildo Zegna, with the assistance of Mio Jin, Lara Torres, Oliver Ruuger, Sum Yu Li.

piece series *1. Werksatz* (1963-1969) draws upon the interaction of the body with diverse textiles in archetypal shapes, various colors, and combinations. *No. 46* (from Walther's 1968 *Sehkanal* series) consists of a longitudinal hood that stretches to incorporate two people. This is reminiscent of *Observer*, part of the Ortas' *Fabulae Romanae Spirit* 2012 project, curated by Maria Luisa Frisa. Both pieces focus on accommodating sight, providing a dwelling for the gaze through the means of textiles. *Observer* and the other nine works of this project stand for a cultural metaphor, as they focus on, articulate, and reinterpret a fragment of contemporary urban societies. *Bale Maker* and *Traveller* represent physical descriptions of modern habits and phenomena, embodying homelessness and mobility, isolation and protection.

Ermenegildo Zegna, the company behind the project, produced the colorful patchworks and monochromatic fabrics of natural and synthetic fibers used to create the work. The deployment of textiles touches upon the notion of 'body architecture', but it also underlines the tight bond with Rome, the city that hosted the



LUCY AND JORGE ORTA *Fabulae Romanae Spirit—Bale Maker* Foam, reclaimed garments, cotton, foam, webbing, resin, 64.9" x 177" x 78.7", 2012. Courtesy of the artists and Ermenegildo Zegna, with the assistance of Mio Jin, Lara Torres, Oliver Ruuger, Sum Yu Li.

project, with its characteristic domes that allude to tent architecture.

The Ortas have mediated the boundaries between the acts of dwelling and donning in the majority of their work, constantly challenging the inherent properties and potential. As architectural and sartorial envelopments, they are structured around corporeal dimensions; the body is found in both their conceptual and physical cores. Garments emancipate themselves—they expand in their attempt to become a house, to represent something more than mere clothing.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, dwelling is equated to acts of transformation. Form is derived from human anatomy and its structure becomes flexible, foldable, and tensile.

Aligned with the belief that textiles should be used in architecture because of their ability to deliver the maximum of elasticity and lightness,<sup>4</sup> the work of Dutch artist Claudy Jongstra similarly bridges between the two entities. Her textiles do not replace the architectural structure, but instead they substitute the architectural surface in means of concealment or enclosure.

In a recent documentary on Jongstra's work, the camera captures a man climbing a staircase while instinctively running his fingers through knots of the wool covering the wall. The staircase at the Public Library in Amsterdam (Jo Coenen & Co architects, 2007) is adjacent to a sensuous surface made of felted wool and silk—recurrent materials in the artist's creative practice.

Her large-scale wall coverings, rugs, and tapestries have been hosted in public buildings, such as the Dutch Embassy in Berlin (Rem Koolhaas, 2007) and the Queen Mary University in London (Wilkinson Eyre Architects, 2012), but also in medical centers that require warmer and more personal environments. Her felt creations equally interact with both the architectural object and the human inhabitant. For instance, her Barnes Foundation installation (TWBT Architects, 2012) in Philadelphia consists of 15 panels wrapped in a mixture of white silk on white wool. These tactile panels dynamically co-exist with the prevalent hard interior wall surfaces. Upon closer inspection, the grain of the textile surface complements the limestone, as architecture and texture are interwoven. Apart from an intense visual effect, the panels contribute to the acoustic comfort of the room and reinforce the boundaries of architecture, accentuating the spatial and sensorial experience of visitors.

By drawing attention to the notion of surface, Jongstra's work consists of elaborate weaves and textures. The surface of her felt wall at the Fries Museum in the Netherlands (Bierman Henket architects, 2013) intends to be inhabited by the senses, to create a mediatory threshold between architecture and touch that ultimately aims to reconcile the human body with nature.

What facilitates this reconciliation is Jongstra's signature material of felted wool. One of civilization's oldest textiles, felt is highly durable and directly refers to timeless manifesta-



**CLAUDY JONGSTRA** *Amsterdam Public Library, Main Entrance* (Jo-Coenen & Co Architects) Felted wool, silk, 2007. Photo courtesy of the artist. Stairwell detail *RIGHT*.



**CLAUDY JONGSTRA** *Fries Museum, Atrium* (Bierman Henket Architects) Raw silk, Drenthe heath sheep wool, Wensleydale wool, 21.3' x 82', 2013. Photo courtesy of the artist. Detail *BELOW*.





CLAUDY JONGSTRA *Barnes Foundation, Atrium* (TWBT Architects) Mother of pearl, Tussah silk, Merino wool, 2012.  
Photo courtesy of the artist. Detail ABOVE RIGHT.

tions of vernacular architecture, such as nomadic Mongolian yurts. Jongstra's unique textile compositions are bespoke pieces made of felted wool, naturally dyed from pigments derived from plants and fruits, such as chamomile and berries, that grow on her studio farm. Through a manual process, the long wool staples are molded into distinct, delicate, and sensuous surfaces, evoking primeval qualities. "You have wool fiber, soapy water, and friction—and in a few seconds you have a textile,"<sup>5</sup> Jongstra remarks.

As if in reference to the Ortas' paradigms, the human body is enclosed within Jongstra's material architectural structures. Processed textile surfaces are meant to interact with the body through sensorial means of perception. Jongstra's large-scale felt artworks represent a liminal space where the body actually once verged into space—reminiscent of ancient tactile surfaces that succeeded in creating a visceral connection between primitive inhabitants and their intimate surroundings.<sup>6</sup>

Enclosing the architectural or the human body, these artistic practices elucidate the dynamic between architecture and texture while illustrating how textiles can equally inform dwelling in terms of integration, intersection, and exchange. Establishing new relationships between the body and the built, the intricate wall coverings of Claudy Jongstra and the transformable garments of Lucy and Jorge Orta lift the veil on a tactile definition of architecture.

<sup>1</sup>McCarter, Robert. 2005. *On and By Frank Lloyd Wright: A Primer of Architectural Principles*. London: Phaidon Press, p. 348.

<sup>2</sup>Orta, Lucy (ed.). 2003. *Body Architecture*. Munich: Verlag Silke Schreiber, p. 89.

<sup>3</sup>Virilio, Paul. 1996. "Urban Armour." In *Refuge Wear*, edited by Lucy Orta. Paris: Jean-Michel Place editions.

<sup>4</sup>Garcia, Mark (ed.). November 2006. *Architectural Design: Architextiles*. Volume 184. London: Wiley-Academy, 2006, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup>Gardiner, Virginia. September 8, 2005. "In Her Hands, Felt Is Fashionable," *The New York Times*.

<sup>6</sup>Myzelev, Alla and Potvin, John. 2010. *Fashion, Interior Design and the Contours of Modern Identity*. Farnham: Ashgate, p. 8.

Lucy and Jorge Orta's *Food Water Life* exhibition is on display at Otis College of Art and Design, Los Angeles, through December 2014; [www.otis.edu/ben-maltz-gallery](http://www.otis.edu/ben-maltz-gallery). [www.studio-orta.com](http://www.studio-orta.com)

Claudy Jongstra's commissioned mural for the lobby of the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, will be on display in the fall of 2014; [hammer.ucla.edu](http://hammer.ucla.edu). [www.claudyjongstra.com](http://www.claudyjongstra.com)

—*Matina Kousidi is an architect and theorist, currently conducting postdoctoral research at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich. She specializes in the role of dress, textiles, and fashion in modern architectural discourse; www.architectouture.com.*