



Figure 1. Drag artists performing at Wigstock

Drag Queens, Architects and the Skin

text and photos Sarah Katherine Roszler

FEW ARCHITECTS WOULD raise an eyebrow, plucked or not, when faced with the links between cosmetics and architecture, an issue to which there must be more than horrible puns about foundation. In his book *Primer*, Peter Cook claims there to be "unending parallels between the use of human cosmetics and the cultural development of the facade," and he propounds that "the painted lip has to deal with eating lunch; the sweetly fashioned doorway has to deal with the entry of a horse and cart."¹ Admittedly, such an example is a modest proposal, if not a rustic one—if the quaint lipstick job is reminiscent of nineteenth century horse drawn nostalgia, then what architectural analog can be found for the male face to which all human knowledge of shimmer and glimmer is applied? The crossover is, literally, in the realm of the superficial: both architects and transvestites have become experts in matters and manipulations of the skin.

The architectural skin is much more aligned with that of the transvestite than the biological metaphor

often cited by architects. Consider the amount of deliberation involved. The architect and drag queen both take conscious approaches to what face will be turned out and what kind of an interface it will be between "the native constitution and the external environment."² The range of possible considerations for the architectural or transvestitic skin is as boundless as the spectrum of pinks in an Avon box so defining exactly what skin is (to elucidate what can be done with it) may seem like a daunting task. Leave it to RuPaul, "Supermodel of the World," who inclusively claims that "you're born naked and everything you put on after that is drag."³ Which is to say that after the primary elements (bones, flesh, wiring and tubing) are all in form, the skin can play off, against or with that form any number of ways, understanding, of course, that the adoption of any skin leads to the espousal of a theatrical role and a public image.

The drag queens' skins are created not to allow them to pass as women, but to provoke, to manipulate the tension between what they are and what they appear as. Robert Venturi is the major architectural proponent of this idea—the notions he puts forth in his manifesto account for the attractive idiosyncrasies of the drag queen, acknowledging the excitement of "elements which are hybrid rather than 'pure . . . distorted rather than 'straightforward' . . . ambiguous rather than 'articulated,' perverse as well as impersonal . . . inconsistent and equivocal rather than direct and clear."⁴ The skin is predisposed to applications of the complex and contradictory, with its permissibility of infinite applications and re-applications (fig. 2). So what can the drag queen teach the architect about how to deal with the skin? From applications to implications, why not get tips from the pros?

There is likely an example of drag skin to correspond with any architectural application. At Wigstock, New York City's annual drag festival, a number of potential mascots for architecture were apparent. Justin, an unmade-up pillar of ideal masculine form draped in a black column evening gown suggested the romantic appeal of a heavy black Mies van der Rohe tower floating on its transparent base; both entice by juxtaposing opposite qualities which are simultaneously readable. (The architect may just need to be coddled a bit by the drag queen into admitting that romantic images still draw an audience). Jackie Beat, a raucous three-hundred pound drag queen done up in XXXL spandex, offers another way to deal with the skin, especially in cases where size or

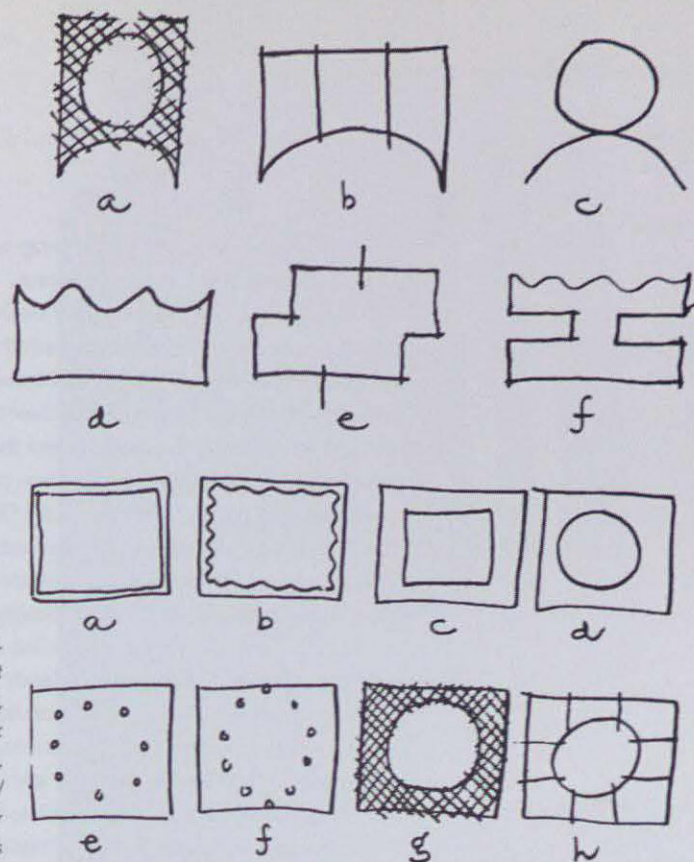
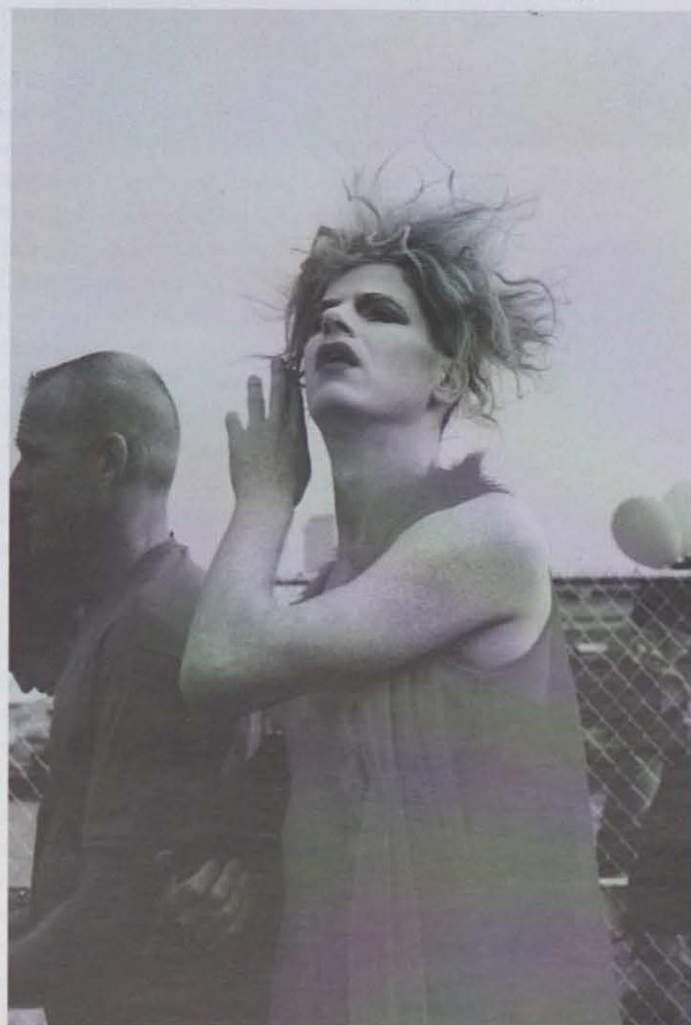


Figure 2.
Robert
Venturi,
complex
skins,
interior/
exterior
contradictions

Figure 3.
Audience,
Wigstock



economy is an issue: go ahead and wrap with whatever can span the most and cost the least.

Some might call this approach trashy but the drag queen would advocate that the only thing better than a little trashiness is a lot of trashiness. The underlying architectural message is that there can be revelry and sensibility in the common and the cheap, a vision fathered by Oscar Wilde (who was prosecuted on grounds of "posing," defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as both an attitude assumed for an artistic purpose or for effect) which "elevated the everyday to the extraordinary."⁵ Susan Sontag used the word camp for this aesthetic, and called it the "answer to the problem of how to be a dandy in the age of mass culture . . . [T]he camp connoisseur finds coarse, common and ingenious pleasure in the arts of the masses . . . through the markedly attenuated and the strongly exaggerated."⁶ Camp Architecture could describe both the mannerization of classical forms (postmodern) or the manipulation of everyday materials (pop). The camp aesthetic owes its start to the Arts and Crafts movement which called for "the integration of craft into everyday life . . . where delight in the useful and the sensual would become externalized into a general condition."⁷ The related issue of a drag queen's highly informed self-realization—Wonder bra only for faux-mammary uplift; Patricia Field's for the best beehive money can buy; MAC, and nothing but, for both mascara and lipstick—is kin to an increasing fetishism of architectural detail.

The case studies of how an individual drag persona can inform a distinct architectural application of skin are as numerous as the personae themselves. But the approaches to skin that typify a gathering of transvestites, the drag cabaret, also inspire some architectural pointers. The drag act often features myriad costume and cosmetic changes. In the last scene of the film *Priscilla, Queen of The Desert*, three drag queens change get-ups about four times in one act, morphing from baroque swans to psychedelic lizards. It's not a relationship between the skins which is exciting (in fact, in the drag world, it may often have to be accepted as lacking) but the way that change itself transfixes an audience. The appeal of metamorphosis is employed architecturally not just in the sense of renovation and retouching, but in the very first stages of building. The construction site is mythical in its capacity to cull a devoted audience of progress-watchers. Increasingly, technology can also make chameleons of buildings, with the skin of a structure able to

absorb or join with new parts, or capable of going from transparent to opaque to translucent at the touch of a button. And the faster the look of something big can change, the more punchy excitement it can deliver.

Alternatively, the drag change of costume may not just be a quick exchange, but a slower delaying. The strip act is a popular drag routine in which the changes are made visibly and sequentially. The progression is meant to cause anticipation, to flaunt every skin as it is revealed then removed, and ultimately to prepare the audience for a climax. In a legendary New York drag act, an ecdysiast went from evening gown to cocktail dress to lingerie to coyly placed fan to nothing while singing "What Makes a Man a Man." This baring-of-all resembles the ceremonial architecture of ancient civilizations like the temples at Edfu or of Ancient Greece, which brought the visitor through progressive skins leading to a final skin around the most sacred part of the building. (Not coincidentally, this most internal skin often preserved a devotional statue-body.) Finally, when all the act, roles and costumes are headlined together as a drag variety show, it's the interplay of acts, roles and costumes which is attractive. Few people go to a drag show in allegiance to one particular queen. It's the complementary (or defamatory) dramatics which draws the crowd. The inclusive, often clashing, line-up of imagery emphasizes the sweetness of eclecticism and the sassiness of disharmony—evidenced and headlined in architectural examples like Ushida and Findlay's "Soft and Hairy House"; the architect can certainly extract something about tectonic combination from the drag variety show.⁸

After passing the architect a few tips about the innumerable applications of the skin and its achievable effects, the drag queen would point out that the designing and donning of a skin always has certain implications. The choices made will often be subject to criticism for what they do or do not represent. A skin can convey a message that was never intended. How to anticipate for public hostility in the face of the unfamiliar? If, however, the drag queen does relish provocation, it has to be done with a sensitive skin. Quentin Crisp hinted that "it might be possible to rule the world through the skillful use of cosmetics."⁹ The architect has to be equally aware of who will be on the outside looking on. There is a parallel desire for the skin to help the building fit into its context but make it stand out. The skin should attain the conceived look and communicate the intended attitude.

There follows the issue of how a known thing should look. Most cultures would prefer that their men be identifiable as men of that culture. In the West, this allows men to experiment with a variety of known looks provided the look doesn't offset the evidence of "maleness." A drag queen often gets flack for subverting culture with indulgent manipulations and obscene contradictions. Similar reactions are often expressed by structural fundamentalists in reaction to any skin that is not somehow a direct result of what is within. The architect can look again to the drag queen for ways to cope with such naive or skeptical audiences. One option is to present such a "good lie" that the "truth" isn't evident. Many men, drag queens or not, have passed as women without any suspicious conjecture otherwise. The approach, though, is usually one that puts an unflamboyant face forward to pass unnoticed by the public (at least for a while; most skins, drag or architectural, eventually reveal what's below the surface). Hopefully the reaction to the "truth" is favourable, resulting in some kind of enlightenment. A final option in the presentation of the unexpected skin, is to just go ahead and meet criticism without hostility but with a "thick skin." If a drag queen can learn to stand stiletto-tall to skepticism, then the likes of Montreal's Axinor building can proudly put an optimistically-sci-fi, concave, aluminum skin to Sherbrooke Street while a dowdy brick box recedes from the façade (fig. 4). The obvious façade is an architectural skin which some may consider a "kitsch lie," but it's a "lie" that is accepted along with a good-natured acknowledgment of the truth, giving it a kind of dignity.

Not only can drag queens recommend ways for architects to take a solid stance on the morality of contradictory skins, they can also suggest ways of dealing with contradictions that no longer call for self defense. Colin Rowe claimed contradiction to be the number one impediment to the achievement of Utopia. He asserted that "the range of often contradictory ideas which we habitually entertain are, together, hostile to any form of utopia—the perfectly integrated blend of art, politics and social structure independent of time or place."¹⁰ Utopia as aimed for by the drag queen is a possibility that is not too ethereal or elusive. It's a form of constant reevaluation manifested by the continuous redefinition and adoption of skin. A similar approach to Utopia found architectural advocacy in the sixties, with the likes of the Archigram group, who pushed for "Plug-in Cities"



Figure 4.
Axinor
Building,
Montreal



Figure 5.
Audience,
Wigstock

and towns which could become metropolises in a day, the aspiration being that if architecture could evolve according to personal and local need by the continuous alteration of new skins, contradiction would be overcome. Their ambitious proposals may have stayed in the realm of the theoretical, but scaled-down versions are gaining increasing popularity, because the skin can permute as changes are made to floors, balconies, windows, cladding and details to adapt to the life the skin is wrapped around. The drag queen suggests using the infinite adaptability of the skin to reconcile contradiction and invoke a version of Utopia attained by permutability. As a bonus, the drag queen advises the architect about the persuasive power of a skin infused with optimism and positivity; as Jem Jender said "You're not going to wake up in the morning, put on a wig and a pair of high heels and go argue with the IRS!"¹¹

So after the drag queen has shared her approach to skin with the architect—how to design a skin, how to apply it, how to understand its meanings, how to emphasize its intentions to an audience and how to demonstrate its potential to the public—the architect will be acquainted with a full kit of professional tools and tips for dealing with skin, all of which encourage experimental and exciting approaches. A drag queen once said, "Just when you think that you've gone too far, you should keep on going."¹² Architects need to attempt extreme possibilities, or even just acknowledge them, to not fear more being less, because the skins that can be conceived in the boudoir or on the drafting table can carry huge meaning.

Colin Rowe asserted that "the road to progress will not be sought in deeds or revolutions but in the inner constitution of man and its transformation."¹³ Architects might additionally seek the road to progress in studying the *outer* constitution of man and *his* transformations and discover a possible muse in the conception of delightful and potent architecture. As one New York queen said so much less subtly, "Drag is centered in the power of the icon and people's need for images, strong images. Because drag is like sitting in a Sherman tank. It has power and you're driving that motherf---er."¹⁴

1. Peter Cook, *Primer* (London: Academy Editions, 1996), 91.
2. Gyorgy Kepes, qtd. in Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1996), 84.
3. RuPaul, qtd. in Catherine Chermayeff, Jonathan David, and Nan Richardson, ed., *Drag Diaries* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1995), back cover.
4. Venturi, 16.
5. Aaron Bettsky, *Queer Space* (New York: William Morrow, 1997), 79.
6. *Ibid.*, 81.
7. *Ibid.*, 82.
8. Cook, 105.
9. Quentin Crisp, qtd. in Chermayeff, David and Richardson, 88.
10. Colin Rowe, "The Architecture of Utopia," in *The Mathematics of The Ideal Villa and Other Essays* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1982), 214.
11. Jem Jender, qtd. in Chermayeff, David and Richardson, 34.
12. *Ibid.*, 31.
13. Rowe, 215.
14. Mathu, qtd. in Chermayeff, David and Richardson, 71.

Sarah Katherine Roszler is accepting donations towards the purchase of a pair of navy kerrisdale rounders, visible at www.fluevog.com.



Figure 6.7.
Drag Queens,
Wigstock