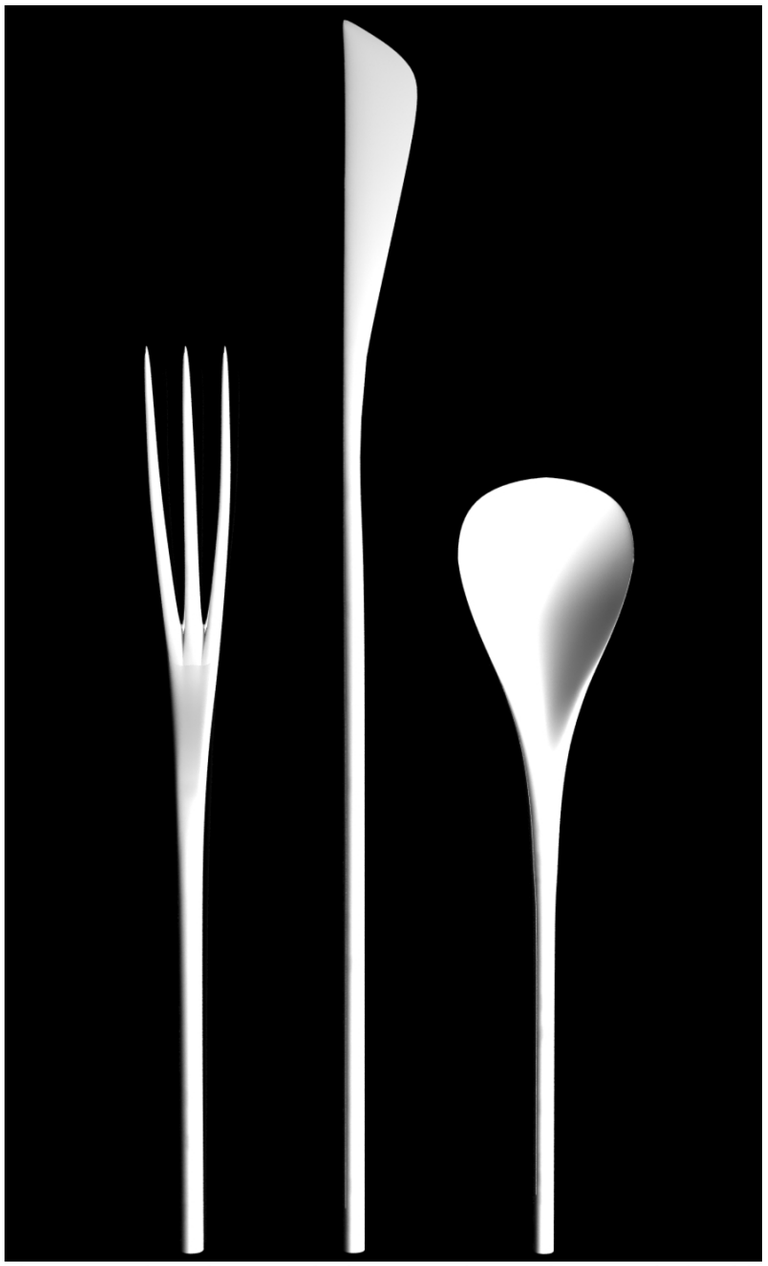
On Intimacy and Design

Ramona Albert & Christopher Johnson



Flatware_1, stainless steel, 2009; utensils offer unique insight into our basic usage of tools, and the relationship formed. These simultaneously exhibit both primitive and surgical characteristics.

Most people have a favorite object.

Even if one rejects materialism and tangible goods, or even if one doesn't realize it or can't express it, the lives of all people are made more enjoyable, pleasurable, or enriched if even just a little bit, by a particular small-scale object. This object might be a toy, or a piece of clothing, or a type of tool maybe. Perhaps it is used daily, perhaps hourly, perhaps only once every few months, but this object is certainly used—and enjoyed—on some occasion.

Everyone also has a favorite space, either a space where they feel most comfortable, or one that incites feelings of pleasure as a result of simply being there. As with objects, perhaps one doesn't realize it, or can't express the how or the why, but people experience pleasure or joy more in certain places than others. Even if this place happens to be in nature, to be sure it is comprised of spatial and environmental elements that make that place a space.

Certain objects and spaces become salient for people as a result of two factors: mental association and design. Mental associations are memories, belief systems (religions and philosophies), and superstitions, and to the observer can often have more bearing than the physical characteristics of a thing. However, design can never be completely removed from the situation. In fact the design of a thing, be it an object or a space, is often the facilitator or catalyst, if not the cause itself, of the mental connection one has with it.

Objects and spaces might be considered as completely different concepts and entities, but strangely they share very similar characteristics, with the defining differences being those concerning experience. Where objects have an inherent outward expression as closed entities, spaces have an inherent introversion as open constructs. While this may seem counter-intuitive, consider the way some objects beg to be touched or handled. Objects are self-contained manifolds that want to present themselves outwardly. Contrast this notion with the manner in which an empty space is inward-looking and wants to envelope something, but regardless of its physical boundaries it is boundless and infinitely layered in its possibility and plasticity. These are fundamental differences in how the observer experiences an object versus a space. What links the two however, is that they are both engaged and utilized in some way, and therefore must share similar elements and qualities of design.

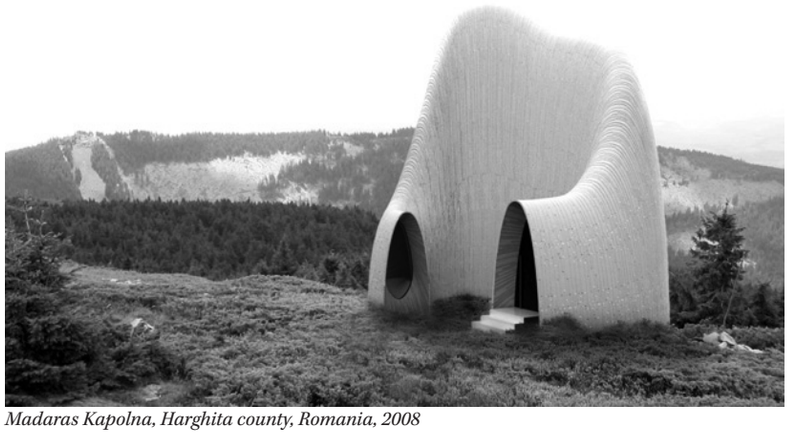
We are particularly interested in the less immediate of these shared qualities. It is one that is subtle and even visceral, that of intimacy. This concept is not to be confused with objects or spaces necessarily having the characteristics of being "intimate," as one might refer to lingerie or cozy restaurant nooks (although coincidentally, these are potentially favorite objects and spaces for people). In-

stead we refer to the most personal scale and the relationship that one forms with traits they deem most familiar, comfortable, and somehow natural. We believe this forms the conceptual link, the bridge over the cross-disciplinary barrier, that allows one to perceive a connection between what they are holding in their hand and that which envelopes them. This scenario might manifest itself as a layered experience; a particular moment occurs when one is holding a "perfectly" formed and balanced fork in their hand, while eating at a table at the "perfect" height, while dining in a space of such dimensional, acoustical, and lighting exactness that the symmetry is perceived, and the experience is whole. There is intimacy at work.

In our own work we have found that this directly translates to the design process. We invariably find ourselves designing objects to complement our architecture and vice versa, having been instinctively drawn to doing so. We don't consider these to be tangents to the task at hand, but rather a necessary component. This is not to say that an object can't stand on its own without a spatial repository, nor that a room is ineffective without its companion piece, but rather that they should be understood as mutual origins of reciprocity. For example, while recently designing a small pilgrimage chapel, we felt compelled to complete the space by imagining what would indeed complement its atmosphere. A project with no electricity or plumbing seemed to be the perfect opportunity to resurrect the experience of space by candlelight, thus suggesting the necessity of candelabra. The small points of light that emanate from the candelabra give a quiet radiance to the dark walls of the nave, while the polished steel objects are inextricable from their stations in the space. These are objects as architecture.

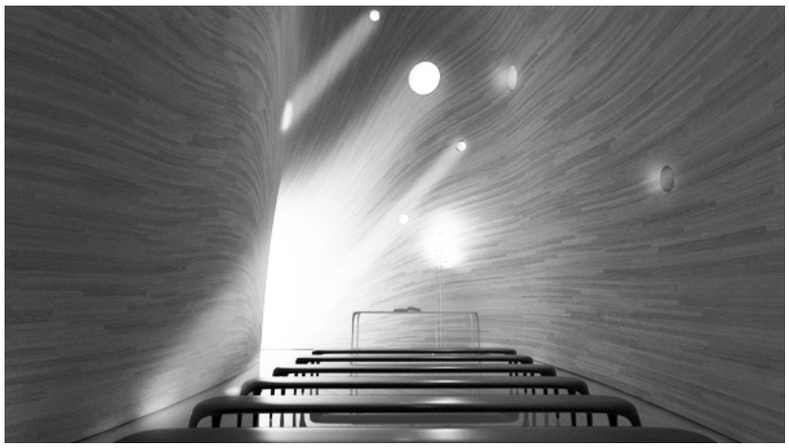
Part of this concept of intimacy stems from the relationships people have with materials. These relationships are both a priori and a posteriori, both innate and experienced. There are reasons aside from physics why humans find comfort in warm water, and similarly why some won't immerse themselves in water completely. There are reasons beyond status symbolism that people find fur and leather pleasurable, and why others find it repulsive. There are reasons, in addition to nostalgia of early survival, that we enjoy a good fire, with its arrhythmic sound, its warmth in our face and the cold at our backs. A material gives both quantitative and qualitative characteristics to an experience, and it speaks to both mental associations and design. We constantly think about materials in our work, but beyond the simple questions of form, use and manufacturing. We think of them as philosophies, as history. We think of them in terms of social relationships and psychological dichotomies, in terms of their associated fears, attractions, symbolism, and stigmas. We enjoy learning about new materials and are curious about how they will find their

Bathroom interior, Cycloid House, 2011; there is a reciprocal relationship of objects and space



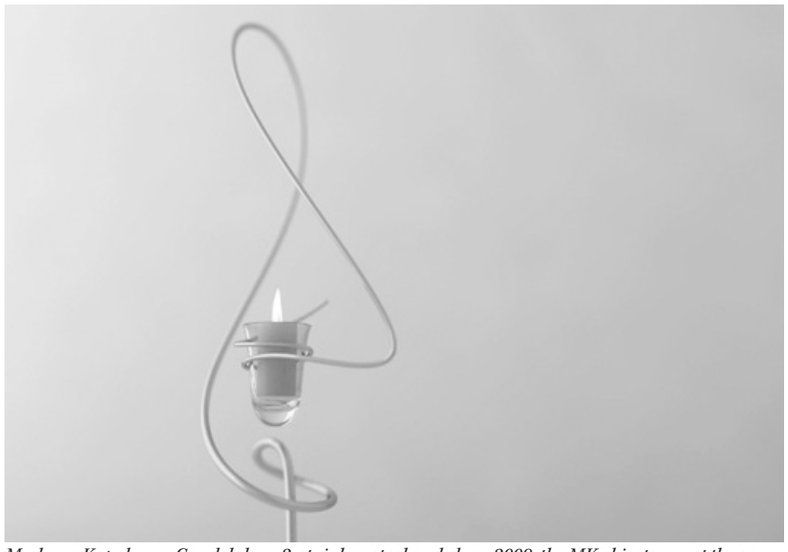
Madaras Kapolna, Harghita county, Romania, 2008

Madaras Kapolna_Altar/table, stainless steel, 2009



Interior of Madaras Kapolna; sources of light seen and unseen. Despite the lofty height of the space, the intimacy is preserved by the relationship between light and dark.

Madaras Kapolna_Candelabra_1, stainless steel, 2009



Madaras Kapolna __Candelabra_2, stainless steel and glass, 2009; the MK objects are at the same time botanical, lyrical, and industrial

(At Right) Glassware_1, muslin crystal, 2009; subtleties in geometry and mass are perceived more immediately when felt

place in the tangible and intangible aspects of our culture.

It is important that the materiality of an object or space somehow add to its experience. A material offers more than form and finish; it can provide key elements of function or effect. The J. L. Lobmeyr foundry in Austria makes a type of crystal called "muslin" glass, so named because of its incredible thinness. We designed the Glassworks_1 stemware with this material in mind, as the notion of drinking from a glass so tangibly thin that one can almost feel their lips through the crystal was not only intriguing but somehow seemed so natural as a way to engage the user and the object.

We often find that it is in the realization of objects and spaces where a design can lose its soul if not executed with the same sensibilities as in their conception. It should be noted that right now, with enough money and time, practically anything can be built or fabricated. Further, we may have reached a point in history (or the future, which is it?) where anything can potentially be made solely via digital fabrication processes, from clothing, to buildings, to food in perfect reproduction. This is surely an incredible achievement, but to what end? This is a poignant question when instinctively humans tend to find more beauty in things which are slightly imperfect, if even subconsciously and on a barely visible scale. Anthropologists and behavioral psychologists provide evidence to support this counterintuitive concept, but this may be a fact that needs no scientific proof. Certain philosophies, the Japanese concept of wabi-sabi for instance, have espoused this notion of imperfect or incomplete beauty for centuries, but in the end, does beauty really need to be qualified or quantified? Don't we simply know it when we see it, and so then is perfection really the desired outcome?

In our own work, we tend to be opportunistic in our process and methods, in design, production, and realization. We believe that a design ethos should not rely solely upon a limited set of software techniques, but rather that those techniques are potentially part of a larger strategy, an evolving toolbox of sorts. Certain ideas are more easily expressed or developed in certain digital or analog processes. For example, where the essence of an object lies in the perfect placement of a surface-controlling vertex, a dynamic-modeling software will likely be more helpful than analog clay modeling, and the development of the design unfolds by strategizing with the parameters and idiosyncrasies of that toolset. Similarly, where an otherwise highly efficient digital

Detail of garden at Ryoan-ji temple, Kyoto, Japan, 15th century;

Manual lay-up of carbon fiber yacht hull

fabrication process may fall short of providing exactly the intended form or effect, a hand-craft will be called for in the production of the object or space, and the design is produced using the potential and limitations of the analog tools. It is unfortunate and ironic however, that while techniques and methods of mass-production have historically been developed to produce things more efficiently both in terms of time and money, this has made certain analog trades both harder to source and more expensive. We are intrigued though, that some objects which are state-of-the-art and highly engineered are still fabricated in large part by the hands of skilled craftsman. For instance, the carbon-fiber hulls of the largest and most avant-garde sailing yachts in the world must be hand-laid and finished by experts. Although theoretically this might be done by a computer-driven machine, only a skilled craftsman is able to simultaneously and sufficiently monitor the results and make immediate corrections if necessary. Computers will fabricate with ultra-high fidelity, but they cannot yet perform dynamic monitoring and corrections, not to mention that the ultra-high fidelity inherently lacks the subtlety of imperfect beauty. The concept of imperfect and subtle beauty is of particular interest to us because of its implicit relationship to the human subconscious, and further, to that of intimacy on more than one level.

As we have seen with fabrication, representation in design is a continually evolving paradigm. The history of the dialogue between "the virtual" and "the real" is certainly predated but well-exemplified by a story in Plato's Republic, known as the "Allegory of the Cave" wherein he alludes that most of humanity itself is simply a virtual simulation, bound by misinformation and perceptual phenomena. In fact, as long as modern humanity has existed—for purposes of discussion let's set this around 150,000 years ago with the rise of Homo Sapiens culture and modern behavior (i.e. art, social ritual, and language)—we have created virtual representations and visualizations of "the real," which might otherwise be described as "art." As time passed and our minds, techniques, and ideas developed, so did the quality and content of those representations until finally in the Renaissance we had developed conventional and proven methods to use both two-dimensional and three-dimensional projections to visualize objects and spaces which did not physically exist. These techniques produce imitations of "the real," visualizations that only exist in the virtual domain. It is through image and text (itself a special type of representation) that we understand the majority of our universe, as simulation is required of anything which we have not yet experienced. It is important to note here that representation and simulation are not the same. One is simply a re-creation, the other is a projected experience.

The images, drawings and models we create of our work are treated almost as individual projects themselves, as sculptures or paintings. We believe that these should serve as simulators of the real subjects, being not simply a representation of the design itself, but a projection of the intended atmosphere and perception as well. To this effect, if the relationships between mental associations and design are simulated successfully, what is the difference then between, a painting, a photograph, and "the real?" What is real indeed? These are

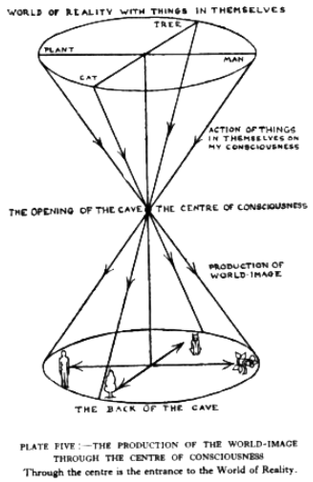
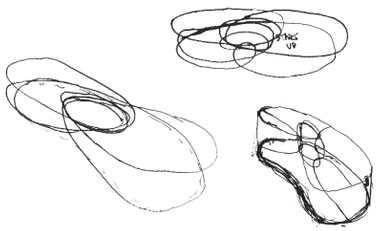


Diagram of Plato's 'Cave'

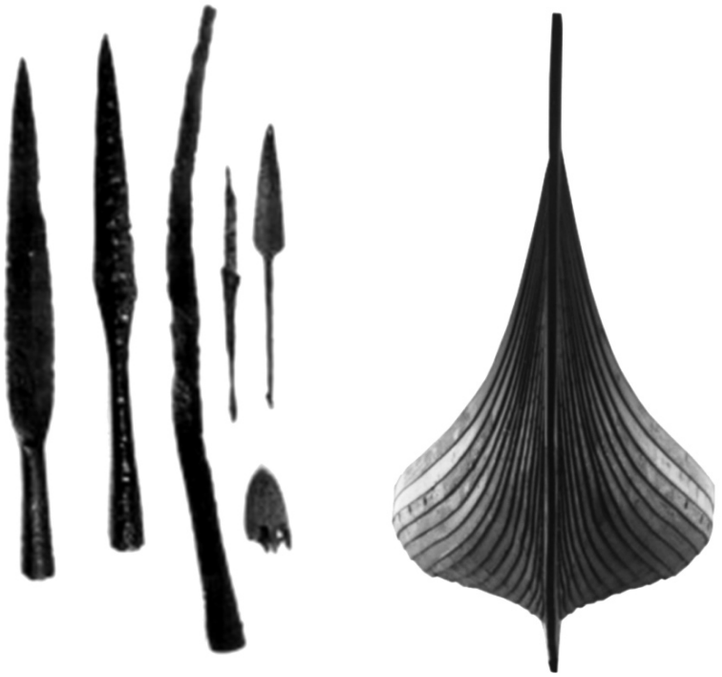


Concept sketches for the Cycloid House, 2010

Cycloid House, 2011; object in a field, containing objects in a field

rhetorical questions, but ones which illustrate the enigmatic qualities of what we feel when finding intimacy in great design. There are paintings and sculptures which transcend the fact that they were created from nothing, that they are simulations of something which did not exist before. There are designed objects which need no verbal companion to communicate clearly with their users, and there are spaces in which their greatness cannot be sufficiently expressed in words and render the subject mute. This too, is intimacy at work.

The objects and spaces people create are artifacts of who and what we are, but also of what we want to be. They help define the human condition, but are also reflective of it. How we began to conceive and execute those artifacts is a very long and enigmatic story, but initially they were likely instinctive responses to our needs and desires beginning with fire, shelter, clothing, and simple tools. These responses formed the basis of technology. However technology can only give us heuristic devices, tools by which we discover more about the physical universe and the abstract domain. In certain aspects, one might say we exist only to produce more technology, which we use to produce more technology, which we use then use to produce more technology. Perhaps this is true, but after all, technology is still just the coincidence of technique, craft, and materials, and we still need an environment to foster its creation and development. In the meantime, humans must still be human. This is why we can still find intimacy in the pleasures of holding a good whiskey glass, or by feeling the instinctive correctness of your favorite space.



Bronze Age tools and weapons; Gokstad burial ship, ca. 9th century; technique, craft, material.