

## Interior Futures

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# The De-Mirror Stage

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**Abstract**

This chapter relies on a co-constructive understanding of spaces and subjects. Thus imbricated, environments influence who we become as occupants. Upon entering restrooms today, people see little evidence of their own entropy. The future of the bathroom lies in changing the stories it tells to its users about their timebound bodies. In the chapter that follows, bathroom-based projects that embrace bodies in flux will be presented and considered for their foreshadowing.



*Fig 1 - Hsing Ying Lang, Mirror, Pratt Institute, 2016.*

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So much depends on silver-coated glass: who we will become tonight as we cover our spots and style our hair; how, as infants, we began understanding ourselves to be discrete beings separate from our environments and our mothers;<sup>1</sup> how we notice that we are now at the age when our mother started to lose her looks; and why there is a stranger in the bathroom staring back. It is unlikely that readers of this chapter have themselves experienced a mirror in this last way. Not recognizing your reflection is a symptom of Alzheimer's disease. As is widely known, this affliction works backwards in its erasure of memory—most recent first, and finally the distant past. For some, the picture of how they look in their mind's eye gets younger and younger, while the body continues to show its age. At a certain point, the person in the mirror that a mind afflicted by Alzheimer's perceives does not match the image of themselves that they have in their memory. Understandably, some people living with a diagnosis become disoriented, frightened, or angry when confronted with their own misaligning reflections. One's habits of self-

care lose this reflective tool, and sometimes result in lipstick applied into a nostril or hair combed east while the face faces north. In short, a disheveled appearance that might look like a problem with motor skills could actually be the result of no longer being able to locate oneself in time. Caregivers for those who experience Alzheimer's with this symptom often undertake a process of de-mirroring the house. Entry halls, bedrooms, and dining rooms are common places within a home to undergo a reflection removal process. But none is more prevalent, necessary, or difficult to remove than the bathroom mirror.

My discussion of mirrors in households managing Alzheimer's is based on the research of Hsing Yin Lang, a graduate student (for whom I ran an A's research studio)<sup>2</sup> who identified medicine cabinet mirrors as needing to be of two moments in time—the caretakers' and the cared for. Hsing's design approach acknowledges that removing the mirror altogether might address the needs of the family member with Alzheimer's, but at the expense of those

Fig 2 - Arakawa and Gins, *Reversible Destiny Lofts*, 2005.

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who care for them. Her prototype works with this slippage between two realities by replacing the standard opaque mirrored door with one that incorporates a two-way mirror that can be illuminated from within. When these lights are on, an inner volume is revealed where familiar photos can be placed for view, rather than the reflection of a misaligned self-image. When caregivers need to brush their teeth, apply makeup, or style their hair, they can toggle back to present-time easily by switching off the inner light.

To discuss the bathroom's future today is thus to discuss how the bodies and minds that use it will age tomorrow. Current bathroom design practice accounts for the elderly with grab bars, toilet boosters, and non-slip surfaces. But like many western cultural inclinations, designing for a durational life currently focuses on bodies, to the exclusion of minds.

Departing from this Cartesian dualism calcified in bathroom codes, Shuaku Arakawa and Madeline Gins offer "*organism-person-environment*",<sup>3</sup> a

concept of co-constructive relation involving people's bodies, their consciousness, and their environments, all of which are in a continual process of influencing each other. While Arakawa and Gins' dynamic model of being bears resemblance to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological<sup>4</sup> understanding of the same interplay, theirs was formulated toward a specific goal—achieving immortality.

Exploring these ideas through several built environments under a larger project, *Reversible Destiny*,<sup>5</sup> Arakawa and Gins tested the idea that, by giving the body an environment that is uneven, possibly perilous, contrasting and contradictory, the minds of occupants would interpret these signals in a way that triggers the immune system. Assuming direct proportionality between the efforts of the activity of the mind and the immune system led Arakawa and Gins to make spaces that were difficult to habituate. In turn, they assert, longevity increased. Take, for example, the *Reversible Destiny Lofts MITAKA – In Memory of Hellen Keller*, completed in 2005 in Tokyo, Japan. Designed to stimulate the senses







*Fig 3 - Arakawa and Gins, Reversible Destiny Lofts, 2005.*

with bright colors, curved walls, asymmetrical floorplans, and irregular floors, Arakawa and Gins asserted that the path to immortality is paved with newness. Always new, never habituated, this is how we do not die.

Whether this turns out to be the case is not consequential to the speculative approach to the bathroom that I will offer shortly. For now, let's stay with the metaphor of the path a while longer, to further consider how the bathroom figures into Arakawa and Gins' work. As the artists characterize themselves,<sup>6</sup> the Reversible Destiny environments consist of familiar functions joined together by pathways made of strange surfaces. Among these familiar zones is the bathroom. In part, the tension between the familiar and the strange is what they conjecture will trigger the sequence of neurons that will keep death at bay.

Writer and researcher Jondi Kean described his experience living in the Arakawa and Gins loft for a week, and the bathroom in particular, as "Like hugging the space"<sup>7</sup> because he was

always touching the walls to steady himself as he circumambulated the cylindrical shower. In the bathroom depicted in Figure 3, the functions are recognizable. Immediately we understand where to bathe, evacuate, and prepare ourselves for public view. Though there is no doorway, these stations are separated from the rest of the house and the central shower obscures the view of the toilet behind. In so doing, cultural attitudes toward having an entropic body that can be characterized by embarrassment or shame are preserved. While I am a great admirer of Arakawa and Gins for their overall body of work, and am able to pursue my practice in part because of the groundwork that they laid, my views depart from theirs in that I want an environment that allows me to take pleasure in an aging body, rather than infusing anxiety about the inevitable fate of flesh into our environment

Ubiquitous interior plumbing and the formulation of modernist worldviews are of the same epoch. The ideas of purity<sup>8</sup> that define this outlook vitrified into the china with which toilets, sinks, and tiles were made. Indeed, the very

whiteness of bathrooms epitomizes how their designers saw the world, allowing cleaners to police the germs that modern science has given us language to discuss. Contemporary toilets remove evidence of our time-bound bodies as quickly and thoroughly as possible, so that we do not see the substances that shame us with evidence that we, too, will become dirt.<sup>9</sup> Effluvia is relocated to the outside, and the removal of its odor deemed so necessary that fans are tied to the power switches of lights. The future that the modern bathroom promised was one where sickness would be kept at bay through the ease that modern surfaces gave to controlling contaminants. Arakawa and Gins sought the same immortality through architectural space that they understood as connected to an invigorated immune system. Both approaches use space as an imperative: “Don’t die.” My own practice speculates that the future of the bathroom lies instead in using this space, and the habits it facilitates, as interrogatives: “How can we die well?”.

Bathrooms are the perfect place to explore this question. Here our contingency is revealed. We witness the insides of our bodies becoming the outsides of our bodies: hair falls from us, fingernails are clipped, and we relinquish a host of other leakages and droppings. As Hsing Yin Lang’s mirror prototype posits, there are other stories that can be told about the mind/bodies we experience in the room where both are at their most vulnerable. Lang’s mirror also suggests a cyclical relation to time, contrasting the linear trajectory told by modernism. Just as Jacques Lacan’s previously discussed mirror helped the infant individuate, the bathroom at large can also be a metaphoric mirror in which we see our entropic fate come full circle. That story might be penned by Hélène Cixous<sup>10</sup>, of the ecstatic pleasure experienced in being without limits. A feeling of connecting with everything again, mixing rather than parsing.

Stories repeated often to ourselves, even fantastical ones, become believed. After enough renditions, it becomes difficult to separate fiction from non-fiction, the stories themselves

become habitual, and we experience them as real. Currently we use bathrooms to tell ourselves that we will not die through ablution routines, grey hairs dyed and wrinkle creams applied. With a final work to close this chapter I want to tell an alternate tale—one of the pleasure that awaits us all in a future where our entropic bodies mix. Our bodies will make our bathrooms tell it a few times a day, every day, until our end, our mind listening subconsciously until then.

“Wet walls” are the thickest in a conventional bathroom because they accommodate the plumbing. Economy has designers use either side of them: Domestically, kitchen sinks and bathroom sinks about either side, while publicly it divides gender. In either case, the binaries of food or feces, male or female, constructed on either side, become singular again when in the moist exit of shared drainpipes. That part of the narrative, though, is redacted with plaster. Plumbing Us,<sup>11</sup> a urinal conjoined at the back, is half in the women’s and half in the men’s, with but one drain hole. A person on one side sees their yellow body mixing with another, slightly

more orange-coloured one, as both flow toward more mingling.

As the future of bathrooms has been imagined here, they are to become less rooms to construct a cleaner self and more places to accept our inevitable futures. Designers in the present can bring this shift about by investing these spaces with narratives about death’s sensuality, about our commonality rather than differences.



Fig 4 - Alex Schweder, *Plumbing Us*, 2009.

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*Figs 5 & 6 - Alex Schweder, Plumbing Us, 2009.*

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### **Author biography**

Alex Schweder, born in New York City, 1970, coined the term "Performance Architecture" in 2007 to encapsulate an understanding of architecture that it both gives cues for how we are to behave, and offers itself as a prop for inhabitants to form and perform their identities. Schweder's most recent exhibitions include "Counterweight Roommate", at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and "The Newcomers" in the 2017 Performa Biennial. The Pollack Krasner Foundation and the Graham Foundation have funded Schweder's projects, and he has been an artist-in-residence at the Kohler Company,

the Chinati Foundation, and The American Academy in Rome as the 2005-6 Rome Prize Fellow in Architecture. Schweder is an Adjunct Associate Professor in the School of Design at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. He has also taught at the University of California Los Angeles, The Architectural Association in London, The Akademie der Kunst in Vienna, and the Southern California Institute of Architecture. Alex Schweder is finalizing a Doctorate of Architecture at Cambridge, received a Master of Architecture from Princeton, and a Bachelor of Architecture from Pratt Institute.