

Unfrozen – a Design Research Reader by the Swiss Design Network

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p.17

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p.37

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p.63

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p.83

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p.99

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p.115

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p.115

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p.115

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p.129

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p. 143

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p. 143

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p. 151

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p. 151

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p. 151

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p. 173

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p. 195

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p. 195

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p. 215

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p. 215

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p. 215

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p. 231

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p. 249

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p. 249

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p. 263

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p. 263

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p. 275

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p.275

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p.285

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p.285

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p.303

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p.303

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# **We are Never Naked: Insulation as a Performing Surface**

In May 1987, an assorted group of thirty-three participants—including fashion and textile designers, academics, and practitioners—gathered to explore fashion and design practices as a function of time, through an intensive 12-day workshop held at the Bauhaus Foundation in Dessau. Organized by Germany's Board of Industrial Design, the workshop considered the reciprocal relationship between designers and the social dimension of their work. On the one hand, the session questioned the qualities a designer ought to have so as to promote a progressive influence on contemporary dress, textile, and product design; on the other, it questioned the effect that each social and temporal context has on the design process itself. Experimenting with a broad selection of materials, ranging from paper to painted silk and knitted goods, participants used each others' bodies as canvases that often exceeded the bodily terrain and crossed over into the surrounding space of the historical Bauhaus building. "This process of permanently exchanging views and communicating on material, color and the language of forms," one of the participants remarked, "was the real essential feature of this seminar, the outcome of which manifested itself more in thinking and in joint ventures than on paper" (Krauß 1987).

Twenty-nine years later, on Saturday, January 30, 2016, nine delegates at Unfrozen—the first Swiss Design Network Winter Summit—took part in a workshop titled "We are Never Naked: Insulation as a Performing Surface," which we organized with the goal of exploring surface interventions aimed at accommodating the body amid Brienz's wintry climatic conditions. Because the term *insulation* may refer to both an integrated or external surface of a building, as well as to additional layers of material surrounding the human skin, the workshop prompted a reflection on the interrelation between spatial, dress, and textile design. It dealt with surfaces that not only entail properties of envelopment, cladding, and ornamentation, but also comfort, regulation, and fit. Participants were presented with a wide range of raw materials, and invited to grasp, delineate, and demonstrate how the intersection and exchange between architecture, textiles, and dress has influenced our perception of space, the relation between space and the body, and the boundaries between these respective design disciplines.



## **Analogies between Building and Dress**

The dialogue between building, textiles, and concepts of dress has deep roots in architectural historiography; it dates back to the era of Vitruvius, who compared the fluting of the Ionic order to the folds of archaic female robes (Forty 1989), and spans the treatises of Adolf Loos, who, in the spirit of Gottfried Semper, traces the origins of dwelling back to humans' cladding of the body in textile coverings. For Loos (1898), such covering becomes "the oldest architectural detail originally made from animal skins or textile products," as it addresses humans' need to protect themselves from inclement weather. Evident throughout the era of modernity, the shared terrain between architecture, the body, and textiles distinguishes the reflections of architects and architectural theorists alike. From the latter half of the twentieth century onwards, however, the rise of domestic, material, and climatic technologies once again places particular emphasis on the body, questioning the architectural process, its materiality, and its agency.

Paco Rabanne introduced his first collection of metallic dresses in 1966; just a few years earlier, Andrés Courrèges had presented his own sartorial creations made of PVC, metal, and plastic. Imagery from the work of both designers can be detected in Archigram's archival collection and its "Ephemera" folder, which stores documentation of their time and reveals a vivid interest in bodily interventions ranging from Yves Saint Laurent's Mondrian dress to an advertisement for a prosthetic arm. Influenced by Pop and Op art, space technologies and concepts of nudity, the design creations of that era aimed to launch the body's new coat—and as the body donned garments made of new materials, architecture was already adopting a new coating. Browsing the architectural magazines of the time, it becomes apparent that the stratification of "personal architecture" expanded far beyond the body itself. An array of insulation and coating surfaces, such as polyester fibers and fabrics treated with PVC resins, was advertised for its ability to isolate a space from light, sound, dust, and high temperatures; its also articulated a concern with processes of molding, insulating, cushioning, and so on. Nevertheless, "much more than walls were insulated in modernity"; insulation was elevated to "a highly active, physical and conceptual agent," calling for further consideration of the larger flux of energy in architecture (Moe 2014).

## 4° C, Fit for Cold

"Environments may be made fit for human beings by any number of means," Reyner Banham affirms in his 1960 essay "Stocktaking. Tradition and Technology," and then goes on to compare the thermal comfort provided by clothes in extreme weather to the one anticipated by the architectural artifact. "Just as a snowy landscape may be rendered fit by means of a ski-suit, gloves, boots and a balaclava, the erection of buildings is not anymore a prerequisite for the accommodation of human activities," he observes, employing the term "personal architecture" to refer to the stratification of material layers situated around the body, everything from underwear to vests and overcoats.

Around the same time, Archigram's "Cushicle and Suitaloon" project emerged, accompanied by the slogan "clothing for living in (or) if it wasn't for my Suitaloon I would have to buy a house" (Webb 1966). He was referring to an inflatable dwelling unit capable of being dismantled and transported by its owner, which embodied the vision of a technologically advanced, portable, and personalized enclosure. At a transitory stage, however, this enclosure would reveal its hybrid character and direct relationship to the human body, as it appears to have been reduced from a dwelling or shelter to a transparent, ethereal layer circumscribing the body: architecture conceived of as an "extra skin"—suggesting a shift from habitable space to wearable space.

A number of recent projects more broadly consider the concept of comfort provision through architectural means, including: Sean Lally's "Wanderings" installation (2013), which employs climate- and energy-based approaches to urban placemaking; the earlier works of Olafur Eliasson, such as "Heat Pavilion" (2000) at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin and "Weather Project" (2003) at the Tate Modern in London, both of which provoke the viewer to reconsider boundaries between interior and exterior realms; and Michael Rakowitz's "ParaSITE" project (1997), which is supported by the warm air emanating from a building's duct system. As long as well-established, solid walls continue to give way to climatic technologies, immaterial media, and energetic interventions, the concept of insulation as a performing surface will merit further research.

### **Insulation: Detachment, Protection and Insularity**

Insulation is the state of being isolated and detached; an insulating material detaches the wearer from their environment, reducing or preventing the transmission of heat between the wearer's body and surroundings. Insulation acts as a protective layer. From tents to outdoor gear to space-suits, insulation plays the role of a protective layer from hostile or even extreme environments deemed unfit for human life or survival. Extremities of performance, which offer the potential to create exaggerated and expanded silhouettes, come together with the extremities of cold to allow direct evidence of the performance of insulated materials: their ability to preserve temperature, expand, and inflate. These parallels and cross-disciplinary qualities were explored in the workshop.

Of course, enough insulation or the lack of protection is only a relative measure of the response to hot or cold stimuli—that is, the sense of thermal comfort. Thermal comfort is understood and defined both as the physiological state and goal of the homeostatic body, but also as a subjective state of mind, which is always shifting according to location, social situation, and the psychological state of the subject. This awareness of comfort—and, of course, of discomfort—is perceived through all the body's main senses: vision, touch, taste, hearing, and smell, as well as through thermoception and kinesthetic perception. The pursuit of comfort juxtaposes the physical need to protect the body from cold with the perplexing delight in experiencing a variety of temperatures, reminding us that feeling cold and warm is subjective and personal.

In Wim Wenders's 1991 film *Notebook on Cities and Clothes*, fashion designer Yohji Yamamoto declares his love for the Parisian air because "it's always fresh and stings my face." Architect and painter Alfons Walde became known for his nude photography projects in the Tyrolean outdoors. Similarly, architect Philippe Rahm explored the comfort of naked bodies in the social and architectural context of his 2009 Venice architectural biennale exhibition "Digestible Gulf Stream." Naked bodies sought comfort in a spatial enclosure defined not in tectonic terms, but as a thermal landscape. Comfort is achieved not by means of insulation and dress, but rather by migration and the consumption of food and beverage, a gastronomic and atmospheric experience. Finally, an experimental

device called Wristify promises a reimagined comfort beyond the whole-body experience. The device provides targeted relief from hot and cold by means of “targeted relief” at the wearer’s wrist.

### **A Tableau of Materials**

In the hands of textile designers, insulation materials are creatively transformed and manipulated using processes such as stitching, folding, wrapping, and knotting these elements into textile surfaces, to cover both the body and space. These textiles can perform in many ways, fulfilling ritualistic, technical, and ecological requirements. The layout and arrangement of the materials and tools allowed for a tableau-inspired, scene-setting approach to the workshop. The material and word stimuli offered at the final part of the workshop’s introduction, alongside the materials arranged and displayed, provided starting points for participants to apply their thought and speculation to the development of project ideas for both makers and non-makers in the workshop. A wide selection of insulation material sourced from the building, interior, packaging, and apparel industries provided a stimulating selection from a veritable cabinet of curiosities.

The materials, with the potential of performance both in terms of function and inherent qualities, were organized into four principle categories:

- 1      Packing materials: bubble wrap, air-filled pockets, polystyrene, cardboard, hand-held warmers, hot water bottles.
- 2      Automotive windshield and other covers: aluminum foil, polyethylene insulation layer; leather (small sample, origin unknown); wool blanket, 100% woven wool; recycled wool-fiber blanket; cork (flexible sheet); synthetic wool fur, poly/wool mix; Climaflex, radiator foils.
- 3      Fleece: polar fleece, a soft-napped insulating fabric made from a type of polyester called polyethylene terephthalate (PET), other synthetic fibers; Horticultural Fleece, polyester fibers; Colbond and other non-woven technical fibers, 100% polyester.

- 4 Flooring and underlay composites: mixed recycled fibers, varied examples including bonded and rubber-backed composites; foam laminate underlay, 100% foam material; recycled foam underlay, mixed foam materials; recycled denim composite, inno-therm.com; knit fabrics (kevlar), 2 x Jersey weights; Tilsatec, advanced textile materials; neoprene, scuba.

### ***The Panorama Enhancer Workshop***

The workshop and its location provided an enticing platform to bring many threads of narrative into one realm. Participants explored the conceptual intersections of body and space, textiles and buildings, soft and hard materials, interior and exterior spaces, public and private realms, and long-lasting and ephemeral functions. They reflected upon the ability of a piece of cloth to assume various roles, questioned the production of collective, ephemeral dwellings, and expanded on the function of waterproof coverings. In echoing Hans Hollein's 1976 statement about the 1974 "ManTRANSform"s exhibition at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York, they did not proceed with exhibiting "products of design, but rather (with) retracing the process of design—returning to sources to show design as a multi-layered, often ambivalent process." Advancing, provoking, and shifting the disciplinary boundaries between architecture, apparel, and textile design, they addressed the need to revisit the multifaceted character of our surrounding surfaces, not least of the environments therein created.

Participants were asked to address the role of insulation for the body and the built environment. They were prompted to respond with a piece of "performance architecture"—for example, a piece of clothing or a site-specific architectural enclosure—to be worn by one or many. One proposal demonstrated that body warmth can become social, a shared means to spend time outdoors, even among strangers. Another concluded that a "duvet wall" can facilitate conversation between people at a bus stop. A third conceived of a site-specific outfit including built-in insulation, furniture, a garment, and goggle accessories allowing one to enjoy a multisensory panorama of the wintery landscape. In their entirety, the proposals considered insulation alongside the collective or sublime

experience of cold environments. The workshop prompted participants to continue their pursuit to design environments fit for human activities, and, at the same time, the winter symposium was an excellent excuse for everyone to delight in the cold.





"We are Never Naked: Insulation as a Performing Surface" Workshop - Rendering the Surrounding Landscape Fit. Photo © Kim Corti



"A Tableau of Materials" – Automotive Windscreen and Radiator Foils, Horticultural Polyester Fleece, Ropes and Cord selection in natural and synthetic fibres. Photo © Kim Corti





"A Tableau of Materials" – Recycled Wool-rich Fibre Blankets, Recycled Foam Composite Underlay, Polyester Fleece and Cotton Polyester Jersey material samples. Photo © Kim Corti







Workshop Participants Perform "Get Connected - Socially Shared Heat" – A Group Response to the Challenge of Designing with Thermal Comfort. Photo © Kim Corti







"We are Never Naked: Insulation as a Performing Surface" Workshop — A Shift from the Visual to the Sensorial Landscape.  
Photo © Kim Corti



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The essays collected in this volume explore a broad number of approaches to design research: Historical, critical perspectives on design and design research, overviews of the social conditions of design and the theories and instruments of co-design, investigations of design research practices, examples of concrete projects and developments, and connecting the material and digital worlds.

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