Inhabiting the Skin

An exploration of “living inside the wall”.
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Clare McCaffrey

Abstract

Appreciation of the natural light, air, and scenery outside the built interior environment spurs the architect’s desire to “bring the outside in”. (Lately, floor-to-ceiling glazing is the most popular way of doing this.) Appreciation of what can be found “in the wall” also inspires the architect. Neither inside nor outside, being “in the wall” offers unique sensory experiences. Historically, the thick masonry walls of public buildings provided spaces [such as the arched vestibule of a library] within the walls’ openings where people could gather to talk or wait out the rain. Another example of space within walls is the window seat, which is the architect’s response to many peoples’ desire to curl up inside a window to read a book or to watch what’s going on outside. Modern materials and technologies have allowed us to build buildings taller and lighter than ever before but they also have led us to cease creating those special spaces, neither inside nor outside, that protect people from the elements without entirely cutting them off from them.

It is this third space, neither inside nor outside, that I seek to reclaim in this thesis project. I hope to return to people space of fresh air, indirect, natural light, a sense of protection, and openness; a place where stories are traded, secrets are whispered, and stars are wished on. With this project, I seek to develop a third space.

The project consists of two sister buildings that share a courtyard. Each apartment runs the depth of the building between the two skins. The use of each building skins by all residents is central to the theme of this project. The skins were designed in section, the goal being to design a wall that accomplishes everything outlined in a smart -- not technologically, but efficiently -- way. Because there are different requirements for each wall, each skin is distinctive and reflective of what it must accomplish. The only common element is that both the North Skin and South Skin seek to serve as a habitable exterior wall.

The South Skin is compromised of layers of materials that echo the sari and the screen. It is a system of pieces with spaces found in between that can accommodate living. The thickness of the exterior Southern Skin is 10'-0” deep. The multiple layers can be manipulated by the inhabitant. Just as some animals shed their skin in the spring, the users can shed layers of this construction to open or close themselves to the outside.

The North Skin has several purposes. The North Skin must: insulate the building from the northerly elements; allow the residents to pass through it; and allow light and air to access the interior space. The weaves of a tapestry use a single element woven together to form one skin. In this North Skin, we use Exterior Corian panels in a loose knit over a steel structural frame.
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Inhabiting the Skin: An exploration of “living inside the wall”.

A Mixed Use Residential and Commercial Building in Alexandria, Virginia.

by

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my husband, Robert Mate, who encouraged me not to take no for an answer. And to my daughter, Maria Grace Mate, who I couldn’t wait to meet.