

Shifting Judgement and the Relational Nature of Purgatory

Reflections on Dante, the Diaphanous Body, and the Built Environment



Then, once the soul is there, contained in space,
the informing power radiates around
to reshape what the body had before.

as flame inevitable goes with fire,
following it whereve it may shift,
so the new form accompanies the soul.

The shade takes on the form of our desire,
it changes with the feelings we may have:
this, then, is what amazed you earlier.

Dante Alighieri

Excerpts from *The Divine Comedy: Purgatory - Canto XXV*

We build our desires – but architectural language seems woefully inept at discussing the judgemental and often conflicting underpinnings of why and what we desire, and how this relates to the built. In addition, modern methods of drawing and building presumably permit more control and accuracy in the processes of drawing and manufacture – allowing us, as designers, to more precisely impose our desires, but does this necessarily relate to more satisfying built environments?

By referring back to the culturally pervasive physical metaphors of Dante's *Purgatory*, from *The Divine Comedy*, we can glean hints towards how incorporeal instances of desire and judgment are given discreet substance. Careful reading and application of images from the journey of a pilgrim and the diaphanous body (Dante's physicalizing of our

desires as a body in purgatory) to the site, a new manner of speaking about the possible and desirable repopulation of multiple wants within a site becomes possible.

Reconnecting to this underlying dialect of a pervasive cultural origin we discuss the way in which we, as a body politic, judge and desire to intervene in site generally. Dante is largely expressing that it is imbalance and error, and not particular injury that is at the root of suffering – therefore perhaps we need to include balances and diversity in the practice of Architecture. Where our goal is anticipating informed plurality, instead of commanding static precision to dominate how we communicate towards built projects.

The site, a group of derelict riverside houses (Woodrow Place), and the issues of neglect, judgement and dereliction, are

current and living struggles in a rapidly changing community. The questions of how to maintain a diverse neighbourhood while funding infrastructure maintenance and allowing population growth are being asked by the community itself. In response to these challenges this thesis proposes building living spaces that are both for diverse persons who will make them homes, but are also diverse in how they are built – being unapologetically relational in nature. The role of designer shifted from declaring a specified form and performance, which can only be deviated away from (as error in traditional architectural practice), to negotiating between various components understanding and guiding the range of built opportunities to inhabit the buildable limits for the available materials.

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