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Veils and velocities

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Summary: The bonds of fashion and the constructed environment are deep, tectonically and culturally. In medieval spiritual meditation, the mind was built in the image of a walled city whose buildings were “clothed” by moral understanding; in Renaissance Florence, the philosopher-doctor Marsilio Ficino recommended that planetary colors be worn and applied as architectural ornament to assist in contemplation and judgment. Linked etymologically, our habits (abitudine), clothing (abito), and buildings (abitazione) are the revealing ornaments of our minds, preparing us for everyday life. The array of artifacts and accessories that extend from clothing to shelter furnishes the imagination with ingredients for personal and shared memory and identity. This article will consider several historical and contemporary examples.

Keywords: Alberti - architecture - body - decorum - empathy - habit - history - identity - ornament - period - product design - style - upstream - Vitruvius.

[Summaries in spanish and portuguese at pages 189-190]

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Veils

“Movements of the soul are made known by movements of the body.” Leon Battista Alberti (1404-72) (Alberti, 1435)

What animates us? In fifth-century BCE Greece, philosophers and physicians conspired to grasp the workings of the human body. Their conjectures about its motivating forces emerged in sculpted form through innovative surface articulation, including arteries and veins, and postures that embodied theories about the nutritive function of respiration

and blood (Metraux, 1995, p. 92). While sculptors gave rise to pulse and breath by the skins of their stone, tragedians composed poetry and plays to elicit group catharsis in the theater, and a contemporary drinking song reflected exasperation with our inability to *know* one another:

To see what sort of man each person is,
 divide up his breast
 and look at his mind, then close it again,
 and think with an undeceiving mind
 that he's your friend. (Padel, 1992, p.14)

Style and ornament

“A genius is the one most like himself.” Thelonious Monk (1917-82)

From day to day, each of us walks a line between standing out and fitting in. What equips us to become the selves we fabricate? The early Renaissance poet, Petrarch, writes: “I much prefer that my style [*stilus*, pen] be my own, uncultivated and rude, but made to fit, as a garment, to the measure of my mind, rather than to someone else’s, which may be more elegant, ambitious, and adorned, but deriving from a greater genius, one that continually slips off, unfitted to the humble proportions of my intellect” (2005, 3.213). Like an outfit, a wardrobe, room, home or city, identity is a malleable notion. We try on other people for size. We mimic. We emulate. We seek clues from our surroundings. We accumulate *stuff*, surrounding ourselves with artifacts that enhance, transform and inhibit our habits. To allow space for alternative selves, we change our clothing, accessorize, acquire furniture and rearrange it; we change our rooms, residences, cities, cultures, identities... Artifacts signify us, offering clues about who and where we are, embodying how we dwell by what we have. Our possessions are the iceberg tips of our *habitus*, which is one’s way of being part of a group and uniquely oneself, by voice, disposition and gesture. A related Italian term, *abito*, is described as “a special condition or habitual quality of the mind which manifests itself outwardly in a special costume or equally habitual behaviour, which in turn reacts upon the disposition and moral attitude of the individual” (Castiglione, 1929, p.351 n.123). For the Renaissance, for example, ornament signified social standing and individual genius by the physical gestures of dance, swordsmanship, and the careful interpretation of signs and emblems that were central to intellectual commerce.

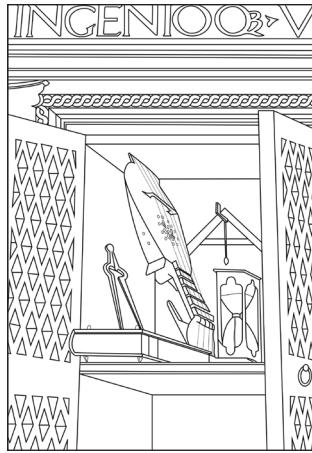


Figure 1. There is an Aesopic fable in which Prometheus places gates in the human breast to protect our thoughts and feelings from intruders (Padel, 1992, p.14). The ancient Roman architect, Vitruvius, lamented this condition, calling for a window in the breast (*pectora fenestrata*) to openly disclose the talents and intentions of others (1983, p. 3. Preface. 1). In Renaissance humanist pedagogy, a teacher aimed to draw out and refine a pupil's innate talent (*ingenioque*), which is often hidden or undisciplined. In the Gubbio *studiolo* (1477-83), the term *Ingenioque* was deliberately juxtaposed with instruments of measure and construction, emphasizing that talent must be coupled with discipline and a willingness to learn, a combination that marked Cicero's ideal orator and Vitruvius's "perfect craftsman" (Kirkbride, 2008, Extended Caption 13). From deep tradition, the arts and instruments of material making –including weaving, architecture and decorative arts– have offered abundant metaphors for cognitive training and self-edification. **Source.** Facsimile detail of the Gubbio *studiolo*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art of New York City, Rogers Fund, 1939. (39.153). Drawn by Daulton Kao © Robert Kirkbride.

Often considered frivolous, ornament speaks volumes to an astute listener. With the Roman rhetorician Quintilian as his inspiration, the early Renaissance architect Leon Battista Alberti "declared *ornatus* to be the most important guide for the composition of surfaces," notes Caroline van Eck, "with *decorum* as a concluding and covering quality. *Ornatus* is generally translated as 'ornament', but does not have the modern sense of decorative bits and pieces to be added or left out at will. For the Romans *ornatus* suggested distinction and excellence, and having resources at hand to meet with any challenge; *ornamentum* could not only signify ornament but weapons as well, equipment or a soldier's accoutrements" (van Eck, 2007, p.25).

When resuscitating the past the historian is akin to a detective, who construes a sequence of past events from material traces that are easily overlooked. Similarly, designers reflect on patterns of use, translating our invisible habits into complementary material habitats, furnishings and accoutrement. Fashion equips us to stand out and fit in, as desired. Yet

today, fashion, like style, ornament, and even beauty, is often characterized as superficial. The perception that surfaces are pejoratively shallow is a fairly recent phenomenon. Notably, Adolf Loos's excoriation of architectural decoration in *Ornament and Crime* (1908) does not reflect on traditional roles of ornament and beauty in facilitating memory training and public speaking; rather, Loos ridicules an increasingly bourgeois culture for its rapacious and unwitting consumption of catalogs of period styles. One must dig deeper. Historically, getting to the bottom of things demanded dwelling on their surfaces. In *The Book of Life*, a treatise on astrobiological medicine written in late fifteenth century Florence, Marsilio Ficino prescribes the colors one should wear and apply in architectural ornament to focus beneficial planetary influences. According to Ficino, a healthy spirit is a combination of solar, venereal, jovial, and mercuric humors, with little influence from Saturn, Mars, or the Moon, "or it would be stupid (Saturn), furious (Mars), and obtuse (Moon)" (Ficino, 1980, p. 118). Elsewhere, in a chapter dedicated to making a figure of the universe, Ficino recommends that his readers set up, deep inside their houses, a little room decorated with figures and colors that evoke the generative and protective influences of the heavens (Kirkbride, 2008, Chapter 5). In such light, cosmetic treatments of bodies and buildings take on a different character.

In the Urbino *studiolo*, one of two contemplation chambers built for the Montefeltro dukes immediately prior to Ficino's treatise, there is a delightful Escheresque composition of a *studiolo*-within-a-*studiolo*, wherein the intarsiated decoration depicts a smaller version of the room itself (Kirkbride, 2008, Fig. 2.23). Taking this visual play still further, the same dedicatory text that encircles both "matryoshka" chambers is also found in a sibling *studiolo* built for the Montefeltro summer palace in nearby Gubbio, now permanently installed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Cleverly, the text at Gubbio is not embossed at cornice-height, as at Urbino; rather, it is included in the illusionistic background of a thematic cycle of oil portraits featuring members of the Montefeltro family and historic figures kneeling before the seven goddesses of the Liberal Arts (Kirkbride, 2008, Fig. 2.47). By humanist training in rhetoric, and specifically the practices of the *progymnasmata* and *ekphrasis*, the patrons and their contemporaries were adept at deciphering narratives from the visual and verbal ornament, while using the text and imagery as conduits (*ductus*) to navigate within and between the rooms, mentally. "The rhetorical concept of *ductus*," as Mary Carruthers observes, "emphasizes way-finding by organizing the structure of any composition as a journey." Woven into an oration, tapestry or building, "*ductus* is the way a composition guides a person to its various goals" (Carruthers, 1998, p.77-80). Until the nineteenth century, the interrelationship of composed orations and the decorum of settings informed design at all scales, from clothing to jewelry to architectural appointments.

Among Renaissance humanists, proportional harmonies were believed to underpin all phenomena; the task for painters and architects was to manifest them through drawings, models, buildings and cities. Book Two of Leon Battista Alberti's widely influential treatise, *On painting* (1435), describes the use of a veil of intersections (*velo*) to facilitate perspectival composition (Figure 2). Like the panes of a window, each square-framed view provides a unit of visual information which, when drawn in a corresponding square on a

gridded sheet of paper, enables a draftsman to reconstruct or transform a desired vista (Kirkbride, 2008, 1.7). Understandably, the *velo* has invited comparison to the pixelated computer screen, offering some an iconic example of humankind's instrumentalized disincarnation from the world, as a "detached eye" (Romanyshyn, 2008, p. 509). Yet the *velo* method was recommended by Alberti not to achieve objective distance or photographic realism, which is hindsight rationalization. In fact, it is the reverse: Alberti's veil was a rhetorical and compositional device intended to produce a seamless flow between the world and its representation by *verecundia* (truthfulness), inducing empathy in the viewer for a painting's subject (*historia*). *Verecundia*, as Caroline van Eck emphasizes, "helps to blur the boundary between the artificial space of the painting and the 'real space' of the beholder" (2007, p. 22). The persuasiveness of a composition and its narrative is further enhanced, Alberti asserts, by including a character who makes eye contact with the observer and "by his gestures invites you to laugh or weep with them" ([1435] 2011, 2.42), offering cues for appropriate behavior. Ironically, Alberti's veil has been recast as the opposite of its intended use.

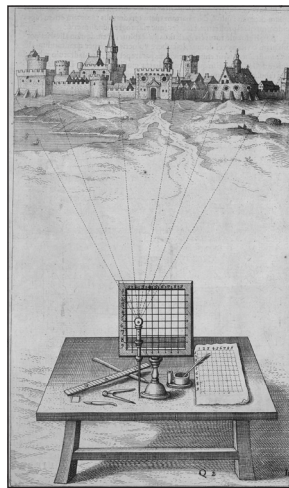


Figure 2. Alberti's *velo*, exemplified by an image from Robert Fludd's *Utriusque cosmic maioris scilicet et minoris metaphysica* (Oppenheimii: Ære Johan-Theodori de Bry, typis Hieronymi Galleri, 1617-21). **Source.** © Collection Centre Canadien d'Architecture/Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal.

On history, empathy and the period body

“The truth is often hidden below the surface. One has to go deep below the skin to find it.”
Carl von Rokitansky (1804-78)

“Depth must be hidden. Where? On the surface.” Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874-1929).

Carl von Rokitansky, Head Pathologist at Vienna General Hospital and dean of the medical school at the University of Vienna, performed approximately 70,000 autopsies during his career, developing multisensory diagnostic methods. By listening closely to a patient’s heart and later examining its condition, post-mortem, Rokitansky devised an empirical technique to investigate symptoms below the skin’s surface. Hugo von Hofmannsthal, poet, librettist, a founder of the Salzburg Festival and three-time Nobel Prize finalist, examined the heart from another angle, through symbolism and the written word. Connecting the pathologist and poet are Sigmund Freud, a student at the University of Vienna during Rokitansky’s deanship, and Arthur Schnitzler, a classmate of Freud’s who would leave medicine for poetry, joining Hofmannsthal and the avant-garde group, *Jung Wien*. The interplay of physiological and symbolic interpretation would have lasting influence

While some have argued there are “no universal laws govern the relation of form and meaning” (Trilling, 2003, p. 90), when one examines an historical artifact or an ornamental motif it is natural to ask what it means.

Across the twentieth century, art historical practices were deeply influenced by the psychoanalytic methods of Sigmund Freud, whose interpretations of dreams, ancient tragedies and everyday details inspired a legacy of scholars –Warburg, Panofsky, and Gombrich, among others– to evolve *iconography* as a method to plumb the hidden meanings of an art work. Yet with time, limitations to this approach emerged; namely, its subjectivity and artificiality. While iconographic research is “extremely important,” as Carlo Ginzburg notes, “if it pretends to be self-contained and sufficient to interpret the work of art in every sense, stylistic analysis and aesthetic appraisal end up falling into the hands of practitioners of critical impressionism of the most tedious and insipid sort” (1992: 41). Scholars such as Michael Baxandall have also critiqued the method’s ocularcentrism, which overlooks (if not dismisses) evanescent cultural customs and multisensory characteristics that were integral to the artifact’s design and uses. To recover these nuances, it is often more illuminating to ask how an artifact *worked*, or more exactly, *how it was used*. By placing ourselves in others’ shoes, and recognizing with humility that we will achieve at best a close approximation of accuracy, historical research is capable of cultivating empathy for others five hundred years removed from ourselves, discovering stark differences and haunting similarities. Such practices, applied with rigor and imagination, also promote empathy with others *in the present*, five hundred or five

thousand kilometers away, inculcating a research and design sensibility that centers on close readings of the *techniques du corps* of a “period body” (Kirkbride, 2013).

As personal identity fluctuates between the desire to stand out or fit in, historical narratives likewise oscillate between recounting what stands out and fits in. Curiously, historic icons for a given period –Alberti or Leonardo as ideal “Renaissance men,” for example– are often *exceptions* to their own time. Is history, then, a profile cast from the strikingly memorable, or a law of averages? Is it a narrative calculus, encompassing the fictions and frictions of the avant-garde and commonplace? The Italian aphorism *traduttore/traditore* (translator/traitor) captures this challenge to historical inquiry, conveying the inevitability of “betrayals” that occur when translating an idea from one language, or time period, to another.

While we may be inclined to punish emissaries for their inaccuracies, such betrayals also introduce new layers of interpretation, pointing up the benefits of historical research. An artifact is *never* exhausted of its capacity to inspire new discoveries. Focused inquiry penetrates the glosses of previous scholarship, resuscitating an historical artifact for present and future consideration. The depths of an artifact are never fully fathomed. Meaning is never inherent, it is a shared enterprise. It is a product of the original maker, who lends expression to the mysterious force of an idea, and it is also a product of the beholder’s interpretive imagination.

Velocities

“Architecture often fails when it neglects the site-specific, and product design often fails when it forgets the universal.” (Kirkbride, 2009, p. 315)

Upon completing my research on the Montefeltro *studioli*, a residential land-planning project in Pennsylvania (2002-05) offered an opportunity to adapt methods of historical investigation for design practice (Figure 3). Skills acquired by the close reading of an artifact, its uses and historical context, translated remarkably well to a forested site, informing a low-impact approach to engineering and hydrology that ultimately received all required approvals (Kirkbride, 2009, p.114-23). Reuse of pre-existing logging roads reduced need for tree removal and site manipulation. Scrutiny of flora and fauna, an ancient tradition advocated by Alberti (1988, 10.4) and Vitruvius before him (1983, 1.4), revealed natural drainage below ground, enabling sustainable stormwater management features, such as green roofs and raingardens, to be integrated with the proposed new dwellings. By conducting the site percolation tests myself, and conveying the sewer module among all local, state and federal officials, I reduced what is normally a ten-month process to one month, an eye-opening lesson in “making haste slowly” (*festina lente*). The intensive personal investment in hand-delivering such a complex document paid dividends by limiting human error and shortening the process tenfold. Economically and environmentally the benefits of such commonsense approaches are tremendous, decreasing the carrying costs of development loans, and increasing opportunities to explore innovative, less invasive planning approaches.



Figure 3. An ecological land-planning project for a 31.5 acre site offered an object-lesson in the benefits of applying historical research methods, such as the close-reading of a text or artifact, to surface indicators of a body or site. **Source.** © Robert Kirkbride, previously published in Alphabet City’s *WATER* (2009).

Some years previous, while working in Torino, Italy, the design of a rolling staircase had offered another kind of lesson in the relativity of speed and slowness. As travelers know too well, August in Italy is *ferragosto*, an ancient Roman ritual where businesses shut and cities are vacated. Traditionally, architectural and design projects close down, too, or slow to a comparative trickle. In the weeks prior, artisans endeavor to wrap up projects and are loathe to take on last-minute work that might complicate one’s escape. In early July, a client demanded that a rolling stair of my design be fabricated before *ferragosto*. Straightaway, I visited my metalworker, Giulio, to discuss the estimated cost and time of arrival. He was, as expected, displeased at the prospects. Casting my eye about, I noted that his workshop was cramped with current projects and not at all well ventilated, despite its bucolic setting amid the rolling hills and vineyards outside Torino. As we discussed particulars of the nine-foot high stair, whose handrail would entail numerous cuts and welds to achieve its gradual curve (Figure 4), I also took note of large sacks of metallic dust, which he explained were required evidence for tax purposes. He added, somewhat pointedly, that the stair would ensure that he would be covered in a rash for his vacation. When asked why, he gestured to his undersized exhaust fan and lamented that summer projects—especially one as demanding as my stair—caused him to sweat, exposing his pores to the toxic dust floating in the air. An idea struck me. “So, if you were to fabricate this stair right now, you would charge quite a bit for your troubles, right?” “Absolutely,” he replied flatly. “How much less would you be willing to charge, then, if I convinced the client to wait until October, when it is cooler?” Presented in such light, the decision was obvious and everyone was satisfied: the stair was produced in October for two-thirds the cost, and the artisan enjoyed his *ferragosto* blemish-free. The most remarkable discovery, however, occurred when he informed me later that I had been the first architect ever to

visit him at his studio. While sustainable improvements often focus on *downstream* by products of production, close readings can be performed *upstream* in the manufacturing sequence, enhancing the wellbeing of fabricators and the poetics of a product.



Figure 4. Rolling metal stair (1991), designed by author; installed in Varese, Italy. **Source.** photo by Giuliano Mastroianni © Robert Kirkbride.

Several years later, in an Upper West Side warehouse that reputedly did not exist on New York City's Sanborn maps, Mike, a six foot six inch (1.98 meter) underwater welder, produced the frames for my first low volume batch of Partner Chairs, whose hand-welded frames offered a loom for hand-caned Danish seat cord. Why an underwater welder? Iron Mike, as he liked to be known, had grown up in communist Poland and didn't mind the freezing conditions of his voluminous workshop. He was fond of cigars and played underwater hockey to relax. But he was also beginning to feel the physical and mental strain of long hours spent in the Hudson River, repairing structures for the New York Port Authority. His helmet alone weighed close to eighty pounds. Furthermore, the logistics of the work were daunting: recounting how he'd come into this line of work, Mike noted that during his training in Montreal, for safety reasons there were at least five people above the water line for every welder below. In New York City the ratio was one to one, leaving zero margin for error. It was a good fit –I wanted quality control, and here was an artisan with a capacity for intense concentration seeking a different angle of work. While there certainly wasn't anyone else quite like Iron Mike, there were many similar encounters with local artisans with whom I produced high quality furniture at reasonable cost, despite low thresholds of production, high quality of finishes and the soaring cost of local real estate. In retrospect, the unexpected seams of artisanal talent in New York City appear to have been part of a larger global fabric in the mid to late 1990's. In the same years,

similar stories played out in the East End of London in the Fashion apparel industry, “in the gaps and interstices between global business practices” (Evans, 2002, p.191). Such narratives likely repeat worldwide wherever new and traditional design and fabrication communities, technologies and infrastructures intersect.



Figure 5. The Partner Lounge Chair (2002), designed by author, welded and caned in NYC. **Source.** Photo by Michael Lisnet © Robert Kirkbride.



Figure 6. In-progress large-scale furnishings for Milstein-O'Connor residence (2010), designed and photographed by author. Fabricated by Fabio Salvatori in his Brooklyn Naval Yards studio. **Source.** Author's.

In comparing clothing, accessories, furniture and bricks, one may subscribe to traditional marketplace categories of soft, durable and perfectly durable goods, respectively. Or for pedagogical simplicity, we distinguish among apparel design, accessories design, product design, interior design and architecture, according to cultural and trade practices. Yet the convenience of these designations is increasingly blurred by rapid shifts in technology and complex social forces. Put simply, we have the capacity and desire to produce artifacts in ways previously unimaginable; not merely by the industrialized output of high volumes at breakneck speeds, but in hybrid modes of fabrication that merge the local and global, high and low tech, digital and manual.

As Alberti's *velo* transformed a well-established memory technique, the grid, into a rhetorical instrument for reimagining the constructed world, new digital modeling techniques like parametrics are generating new forms of know-how. Hybrid forms of design research and production may preserve and enhance hand skills and local manufacturing.

Parametrics, for example, are being used to document and reconstruct tenth century Hindu temples (Datta, 2010, p. 478), as well as to generate mutable architectural forms "through a perpetual state of becoming" (Holland, 2010, p. 485).

By recent legal decision, the designation of a bespoke suit is not limited to the handmade, embracing automated fabrication and, ostensibly, a full range of permutation of the manual and digital (*Nexus Network Journal*, 2012, Vol. 14 N° 3). Full-scale prototyping will likely further blur traditional disciplinary distinctions, promoting local and regional low-volume batch fabrication, with hand-finishing or other trademark touches that add value and interest for targeted audiences. As a result, niche markets may expand as more makers connect with new audiences.

Consequently, overlapping contexts of architecture and product design, noted at the outset of this section, must be expanded. Clothing offers immediate and portable shelter. At the scale of human habitation—particularly of peoples displaced due to natural and manmade disasters—tensile materials currently offer the most economically feasible solution for emergency dwellings. Entire communities and cities are increasingly produced, with shocking speed and magnitude alongside their profound environmental and demographic consequences. Products do not merely fit in one's hands.

The designer, like the detective and historian, conducts investigations by intuition and imagination, informed by methods that rub facts and artifacts across the grain to reveal their hidden potential. Such practices cultivate affinity for artifacts, their uses and users. As such, style and ornament—*and beauty in general*—are to be considered in a positive light. The term *beautility*, coined by Tucker Viemeister (2001), emphasizes that design at any scale must be at once useful and poetic. "Superficiality" evokes a form of empathy that is critical to a non-trivial practice of design and research. As Italo Calvino's character, the ponderous Mr. Palomar, observes: "It is only after you have come to know the surface of things... that you can venture to seek what is underneath. But the surface of things is inexhaustible" (1983, p.55). As a tailor responds to the build of a body, so architects and designers perform close readings of histories, contexts, and users. Such techniques of empathy enable us to envision not only who we are, but also who we might become.

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- Nexus Network Journal*. (2012), Vol. 14 No. 3. See especially Sheil's "Manufacturing Bespoke Architecture," Klinger's "Design-Through-Production Formulations," and Paio, Eloy, Rato, Resende and de Oliveira's "Prototyping Vitruvius, New Challenges: Digital Education, Research and Practice".
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Resumen: Los lazos de la moda y el entorno son profundos, tectónica y culturalmente. En la meditación espiritual medieval, la mente era construida en la imagen de una ciudad amurallada, cuyos edificios estaban "vestidos" de comprensión moral; en la Florencia del Renacimiento, el filósofo Marsilio Ficino recomendaba que los colores planetarios se aplicaran a la vestimenta y como adorno arquitectónico para ayudar a la contemplación y al buen juicio. Enlazado etimológicamente, nuestros hábitos (*abitudine*), ropa (*abito*) y edificios (*abitazione*) son los adornos reveladores de nuestra mente y nos preparan para la vida cotidiana. El conjunto de artefactos y accesorios que van desde la indumentaria hasta la vivienda nutren la imaginación con los ingredientes para la memoria personal y compartida y la identidad. En este artículo se tendrá en cuenta varios ejemplos históricos y contemporáneos.

Palabras clave: Alberti - arquitectura - ascendente - cuerpo - decoración - diseño de producto - empatía - estilo - hábito - identidad - ornamento - período - Vitrubio.

Resumo: Os laços da moda e o entorno são profundas, tectônica e culturalmente. Na meditação espiritual medieval, a mente era construída na imagem de uma cidade fortificada, e seus edifícios estavam vestidos de compreensão moral; na Florência do Renascimento, o

filósofo Marsílio Ficino recomendava que as cores planetárias se aplicassem à vestimenta e como adorno arquitetônico para ajudar à contemplação e ao bom juízo. Ligado etimologicamente, nossos hábitos (*abitudine*), roupa (*abito*) e edifícios (*abitazione*) são os adornos reveladores da nossa mente e nos preparam para a vida cotidiana. O conjunto de artefatos e acessórios que vão desde a indumentária até a morada nutrem a imaginação com os ingredientes para a memória pessoal e compartilhada e a identidade. Neste artigo se mostrarão exemplos históricos e contemporâneos.

Palavras chave: Alberti - arquitetura - ascendente - corpo - decoração - design de produto - empatia - estilo - hábito - identidade - ornamento - período - Vitrubio.
