THE ARCHITEXTURE OF *HOWL*

Earlier I claimed that my first autoethnographic exercise, telling the story of how my work as a designer moved from a student collection (*Medium*) to a more mature fashion product (the Spring/Summer collection *Shift*), clearly showed that the design process had to be seen as emergent rather than linear. Such a claim may be confusing when made in the context of a narrative which itself takes a linear form. Moreover, it raises the "So what?" question. Would anyone want to think about creativity as linear? If not, does it at all matter to state that it is not? Before moving ahead, I would like to argue that, in spite of first-sight appearances, the claim is not trivial.

Linearity vs. emergence

Not being able to address the emergent nature of design could make my autoethnographic exercise questionable. So I simply have to take the challenge before continuing my narrative. Other researchers have found it worthwhile to argue against views of creativity and innovation that would be either linear (or sequential) or random (based on trial and error). Van de Ven et al. (2008) do so in their discussion of innovation in organizations, proposing as an explanatory concept the notion of a non-linear dynamic system, a journey involving motivating and coordinating people to develop and implement ideas by engaging in transactions with others while making the adaptations needed to achieve desired outcomes. Though their topic of reflection seems far removed from the world of innovation in fashion design, Giusti (2011) applies Van de Ven et al.'s notion to creative design. She thinks it is important to do so for the simple reason that the processes, more often than not, derive their coherence and meaning from the narratives surrounding them, giving the false illusion of linearity. She adds:

> "La linéarité, selon cette perspective, n'est qu'une conséquence du regard rétrospectif des acteurs et l'analyse des procédés concrets selon lesquels s'opère l'innovation demeure donc opaque." (Giusti 2011, p. 153)

Some of the opacity was lifted by Giusti's own account. But I think analyses from inside the design process are needed to reach further clarity.

Saying that others have stressed the non-linearity of innovation and creative processes is not enough as an argument for their emergent nature. A more theoretical argument can be

derived from the opposition between Bourdieu's notion of 'field' and Becker's notion of ' world,' as explained by Becker in an epilogue to the 2008 anniversary edition of his 1982 book *Art Worlds*. Bourdieu, according to Becker, uses 'field' as a spatial metaphor to emphasize the limited resources available in any given activity domain: if space or resources are limited, competition is predictable, and power structures will determine the outcome, unless the struggle changes the power relationships (in which case roles may be reversed, but without changing the structure). The somewhat deterministic nature of this model would seem to support a more linear (and even predictable) ordering of steps taken in processes belonging to a given field. Becker's notion of a 'world' emphasizes collaboration, without excluding conflict, amounting to an overall process that is much less structured in advance:

> "But the metaphor of world – which does not seem to be at all true of the metaphor of field – contains people, all sorts of people, who are in the middle of doing something that requires them to pay attention to each other, to take account consciously of the existence of others and to shape what they do in the light of what others do. In such a world, people do not respond automatically to mysterious external forces surrounding them. Instead, they develop their lines of activity gradually, seeing how others respond to what they do and adjusting what they do next in a way that meshes with what others have done and will probably do next." (Becker 2008, p. 375)

Applying this to art, Becker claims that every work of art involves such intricate interactions because it is necessary "to incorporate into our conception of art-making the people who are conventionally left out of such an analysis: the technicians, the money people, all the people I have called 'support personnel'." (Becker 2008, p. 384) Thus the emergent nature of design not only depends on the unpredictable non-linear operation of the designer's mind, but on the fact that this operation takes place in constant interaction with a complex surrounding world with people who directly contribute to it. This is most certainly applicable to the world of fashion design, with all its organizational complexities (as described by Bourdieu himself, by Bovone, Mora, Giusti, and many others). Put differently, in relation to art in general:

> The collective character of art worlds affects works of art because all the parties involved in making those works might do what they do differently, or not at all, and everyone has to deal with the consequences of everyone else's choices. The result, the work at any stage of its development, is thus something no one – not even the one

called the artist – meant to take just that form. (From the editors' introduction to Becker et al. eds. 2006, p. 3)

Unpredictability was certainly a major property of the stages I went through when designing *Shift*. This was true because of a struggle with technicalities, but also because a reconceptualization of my original project forced itself upon me: trying to translate the architectural idea of layering into garments, I got stuck until I managed to conceive my confrontation with architecture as a dialogue rather than a point of comparison. While writing down that part of my journey as a designer, I was of course already struggling with the next episode in that dialogue – which is the topic of the rest of this chapter.

Another kind of outside look and its potential

When reconsidering architectural images that inspired me in the past, I was struck by the fact that almost always the structural impression of a building from the outside was the focus of attention. My first reflex was to do something different, i.e. to move inside and to work inside out as it were. I decided to abandon that idea – at least for the moment – because I also felt there was a potential in the look from the outside that I had certainly not fully explored. There were two aspects I could immediately think of. The first one was the actual physical interaction between the 'shell' of a building and its environment. The second was the visual experience of moving through a landscape with structures that are themselves motionless. This was definitely too much to deal with in one collection. So I decided to tackle these two topics separately, starting with the physical or tactile quality of building-environment interaction.

What determines the outside look and feel of a building most of all, through long periods of exposure to its environment, is its being 'weathered.' Intermittant exposure to sun, water, and wind may accentuate, enhance, and even change the outside texture of a building. The weather impact on wooden walls (as in Image 27) is almost always visible. Sometimes effects are further emphasized by vegetation (as in the white-washed stucco in Image 28) or by efforts to 'repair' (as in the brick wall in Image 29). Even the most modern granite-veneer buildings (as in Image 30) soon show traces of natural elements like water running down from window sills.[1]

[1] For an extensive look at architectural surfaces, see Juracek (2005).

Image 27. Weathered wood

Image 28. Weathered white-washed stucco

Image 29. Erratically repaired brick wall

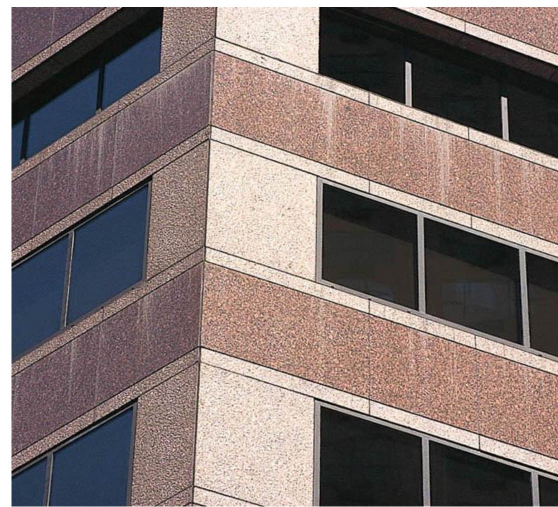


Image 30. Polished granite veneer with traces of water

This look at the interaction of a building with its environment led directly to a focus on texture, even though texture is a property of inside spaces as well as of the outer shell.[2] In architecture, texture primarily refers to the tactile and visual quality of the surface of materials (e.g. stone can be used in its natural irregular state, or it can be chiselled into a rough or smooth surface, or it can be polished) and to the way in which materials are put together in a structure (e.g. placing chiselled lines horizontally or vertically, making pieces protrude or recede, etc.). In relation to the arts in general, the Oxford English Dictionary defines texture as "the representation of the structure and minute moulding of a surface (esp. of the skin), as distinct from its colour." But in fact this is a metaphorical derivation from the original meaning

[2] In relation to architecture, for instance, we must point at Maria Lorena Lehman's efforts to promote variations in texture for the sake of 'sensing architecture,' i.e. to guide the occupants of a building through inside spaces with visual and tactile experiences that carry a meaning of their own. See http://sensingarchitecture.com (consulted on 22 April 2012).

of texture, which is to be found in the world of cloth and garments, making the notion all the more interesting to re-approach fashion through architecture. The term is derived from Latin *textus*, meaning 'that which is woven' (i.e. textiles), and applied by extension to the weblike structure of a literary work (i.e. text). In terms of visual effects, it is applied to anything that exhibits a repetitive but broken or segmented pattern. Thus a photographic album of textures (from as early as Brodatz 1966 to recent versions available on the internet[3]) may include pictures of woven aluminum wire, reptile skins, leather, handmade paper, pressed cork, a grass lawn, straw screening, the bark of a tree, wooden planks, pebble fields, beach sand, a water surface, a block of marble, brick walls, ice crystals on a window, as well as raffia weave, handwoven rattan, and woven cloth. The term is even used by scientists to describe an aspect of cosmic structure, in particular the lack of symmetry in galaxies and galaxy clusters that makes the universe look rough rather than smooth (cf. Spergel & Turok 1992). On a much more abstract level, texture is also used to refer to the experiential quality (or aesthetics) of texts and textuality (Stockwell 2009): just like the notion combines tactile and visual qualities in the discussion of architecture (and in the description of design in the following pages), for Stockwell it combines structural properties of texts (that can be captured by textual description) with reading experiences (describable in terms of psychological or cognitive processes) into a holistic kind of 'cognitive aesthetics.'

(Archi)texture in the material shaping of *Howl*

While struggling with 'texture' as a starting point, without having had the chance to become fully familiar with the background sketched above, the idea of focusing on the physical interaction between an architectural structure and its environment was soon combined with functional elements that could feed into garment options. Buildings are to be found in many different environments. And depending on the nature of the environment (city, suburbia, countryside) people may relate in different ways to the structures that protect them against sun, water, and wind, getting 'weathered' in the process. This also finds its expression in different ways of clothing. A choice had to be made to orient the design process. And as happens so often, I cannot say that I made the choice; rather, the choice came to me. Just when I was struggling with the many options, I bought a dog, a beagle puppy. Beagles are hunting dogs. And there was my inspiration. The first shapes that came to mind were those of

[3] For instance, see http://www.cgtextures.com/, http://www.grsites.com/archive/textures/, or http://blender-archi.tuxfamily.org/Textures, amongst many other sites you find by googling 'textures.' (My search dates from April 2012.)

a hunting jacket. All the work of translating a crude countryside structure into modern elegance and femininity would still have to be done. But, clearly, the anecdotal circumstances behind the design idea have a direct link with my later choice of the name of the new collection, *Howl*, and with the invitation I distributed for the showroom. Image 31 shows the invitation, in which you will recognize the head of a sleeping puppy. By looking at it, you may feel the soft, furry, countryside texture.

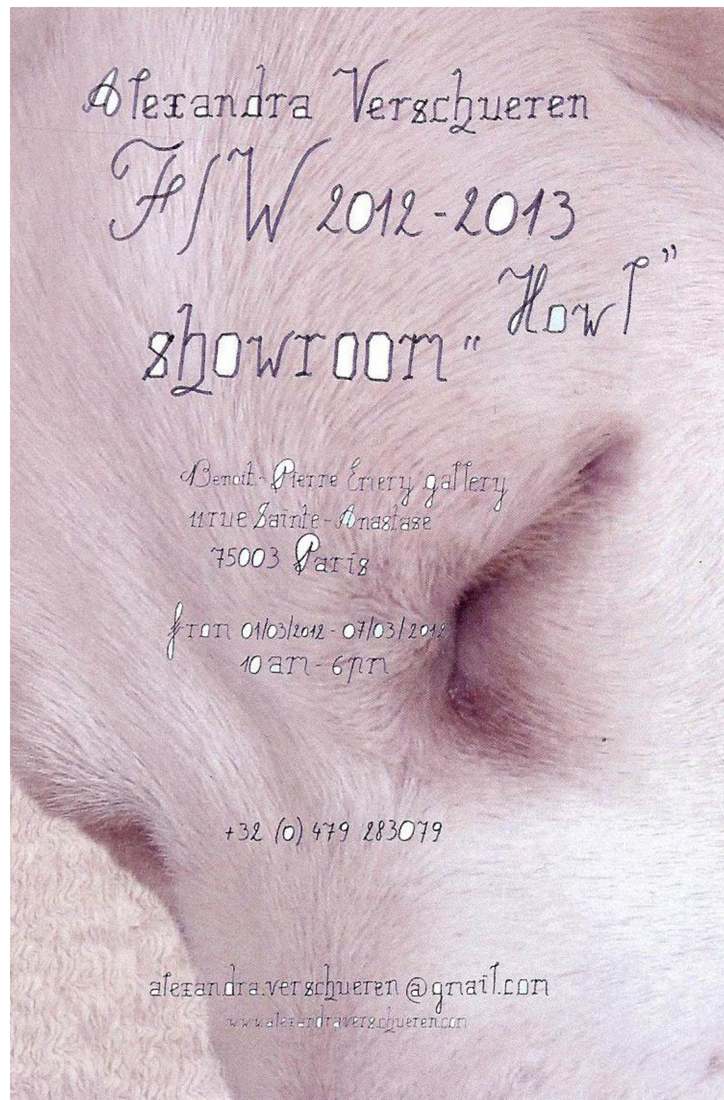


Image 31. Showroom invitation for *Howl*

Translating the crude countryside structure into modern elegance and femininity, with special emphasis on a textured look and feel, required considerable research into the appropriate textiles. There are of course useful guidebooks (such as Hallett & Johnston 2010 for natural fibres, or, for the more experimental new materials, Ternaux 2011), but nothing beats rummaging through a textile market such as Première Vision – something a designer has

to do twice a year anyway. But such markets are too big, so that their usefulness increases when, on the basis of earlier experience, one can narrow down the search. Criteria for narrowing down a search are entirely related to the practical, circumstantial, processes of creative design, as described by Bourdieu & Delsaut (1975), Bovone (2006), Mora (2006), and Giusti (2011). By now, also as a consequence of connections I happened to have, I had excellent experiences with Japanese manufacturers. Not only the quality of the textiles is outstanding. There are also many purely practical considerations such as: being able to get small samples, being allowed to buy small quantities, the certainty of being serviced on time even if you are not a big player in the market. I knew these conditions were fulfilled. Moreover, I ended up finding exactly what I needed. My choices for *Howl* were the following:

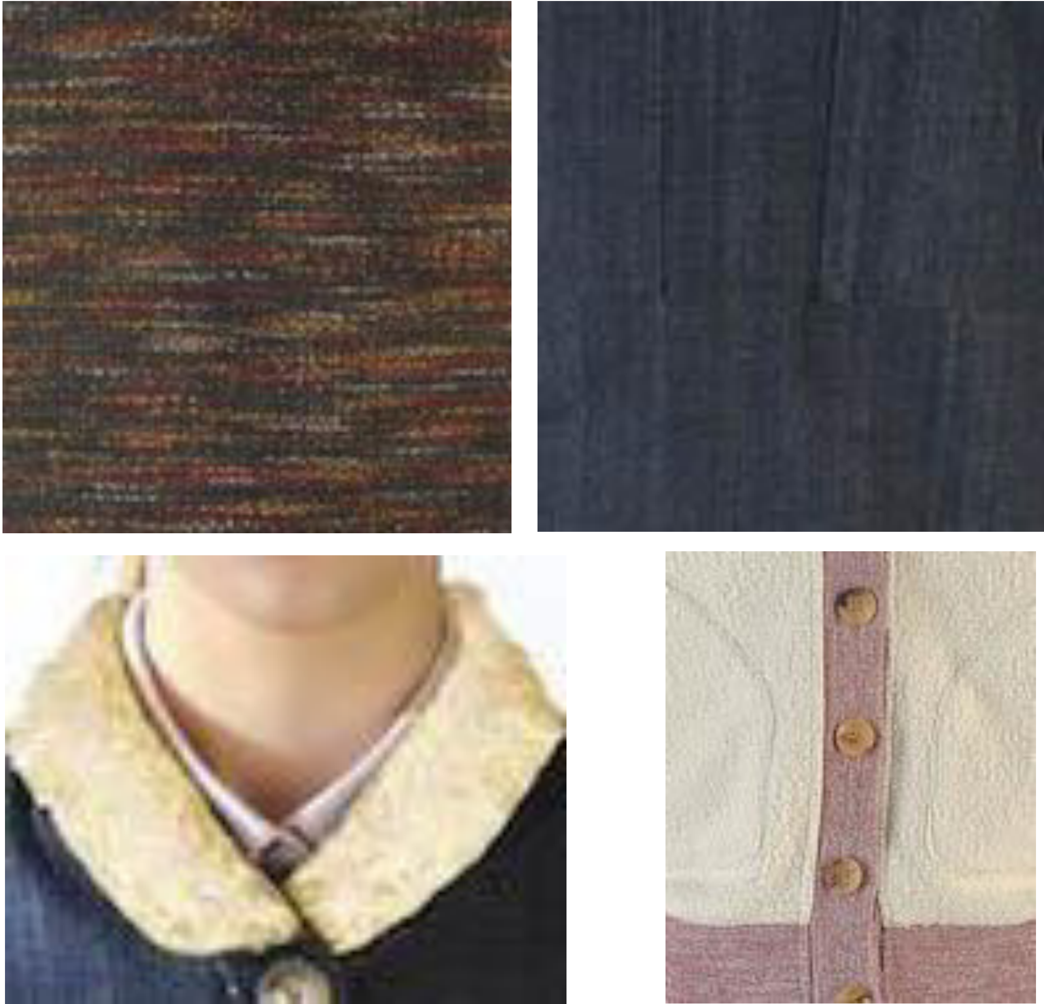
- Wool fabrics for coats in navy and grey, 90% wool, 10% Nylon
- Denim in black and indigo, 100% cotton, but back-brushed for softness on the inside
- Fancy denim in blue-green and red-green, 100% cotton, but with an outside that is brushed so that the texture changes in terms of softness and the mixture of colors
- Vintage cotton shirting in pastel blue and pastel pink, 100% cotton, also brushed to reduce the stiffness of the fabric; normally this is used unbrushed, for men's shirts only
- Yarn-dyed chambray in lemon, 100% cotton; as a result of the yarn-dying, the fabric gets somewhat lighter with time
- Vintage-like slow-woven sweat in wine en charcoal, 100% cotton; this is made in a very special way, as described below
- Vintage-like slow-woven sweat rib in wine en charcoal, 100% cotton; as is usual with ribbed textiles, this was used only for the finishing of sweatshirt, cardigans, sweatdresses
- Cashmere jersey in white, navy, silvergrey, 90% cashmere, 10% tencel; an extremely soft jersey
- Cotton fur in natural, 100% cotton; in fact supersoft fake fur
- For pleated pieces, 100% polyester

Obviously, not all of the choices are rationally related to the design concept for this collection. In fashion, the introduction of novelty is necessarily combined with the build-up or continuation of a tradition, as was also observed by the sociologists whose work was reviewed above. Thus the decision to keep using polyester pleats, the production of which I described in the previous chapter (also published as Verschueren 2012), was definitely inspired by the wish

to hold on to and to further develop an emerging style. In particular, it allowed me to combine clearly visible texture with the architectural layering I had been exploring earlier (also as recounted in the previous chapter), as aptly noticed by Fanny Bouvry in her comments on the collection (Bouvry 2012), some of the pieces in which reminded her of “la double peau de faç ade de certains édifices contemporains.” This observation applies in particular to the styles in Images 32 and 33: the white beam top and beam skirt worn over a lemon standard shirt and a silvergrey Ana skirt (Image 32), and the light blue beam top and beam skirt worn over a navy igu-igu top and Ana skirt (Image 33).

Images 32 and 33. Pleats and layering in *Howl*

Apart from the fabric for the pleats which must be polyester for purely technical reasons (see the previous chapter for a full description of the production process), only natural wool and cotton products were chosen (usually 100%, but at least 90%). More important for the concept behind *Howl* is the way in which these products are treated, as in the case of brushing that affects texture and color, reminiscent of weathered walls. Moreover, the combination of a rougher look with softness of touch fits the concept very well. For some of the chosen textile effects, see Images 34, 35, 36 and 37.



Images 34, 35, 36 and 37. Some of the chosen textile effects

I was particularly excited by the discovery of the slow-woven sweat fabrics, combining all I was looking for: purely natural ingredients, slow production processes and craftsmanship, a textured look, durability, and extreme softness. These 'slow vintage' materials are produced on an old type of weaving loom, called the 'loopwheel,' which was used in Europe and the USA until the mid-1960s, which was imported into Japan at the end of the 19th century either from Germany or through The Netherlands, depending on who tells the story, but which is now used exclusively in Japan's Wakayama prefecture, and on a very small scale. The reason why the loopwheel went out of use in the rest of the world is simply that it weaves very slowly. Each machine, rotating 24 times per minute, produces only 10 to 12 meters of cloth per day, good for no more than 8 or 9 sweatshirts. Demand for mass production replaced them everywhere with newer machines which, with a bigger diameter and rotating 240 times per minute, produce more in an hour than the loopwheel in a day. The advantages of the loopwheel are,

however, considerable. As a result of the lower speed there is much less tension, so that a lot of air is as it were knitted in together with the yarn, creating not only a much softer fabric but a fabric that is also stronger and much more durable, keeping its characteristic softness, strength and quality over long periods of time.

Image 38. Loopwheels producing vintage-like slow-woven sweat

For the actual shaping of *Howl* with the chosen materials, I started, as mentioned above, from the simple structure of a hunting jacket. Combining this crude pattern with the softly textured textiles and a modern, feminine, and elegant cut incorporating barely visible but large pockets, yielded the blue denim Kinako jacket, worn over a pale pink standard shirt and blue-green barn trousers, as in Image 39.

Image 39. Kinako jacket

Some of the other pieces belonging to the collection, subtly varying shapes and pattern elements in function of the possibilities of the different fabrics and of the different requirements for inside and outside wear, can be seen in Images 46 to 48: the red-green glory dress (Image 40), the blue denim howl dress (Image 41), the pale blue morning shirt with blue-green fancy skirt (Image 42), the charcoal purr cardigan with lemon morning shirt and blue-green fancy skirt (Image 43), the wine purr sweatshirt with red-green fancy skirt (Image 44), the wine purr cardigan over pale pink standard shirt with red-green barn trousers (Image 45),

the navy lodge coat over lemon standard shirt and red-green barn trousers (Image 46), the charcoal purr sweatdress (Image 47), and the wine purr cardigan over a wine purr sweatdress (Image 48).

Images 40 to 48. More *Howl* pieces

Design magic?

In retrospect, there is one major conclusion I can draw from the experience of designing *Howl*. The way in which any fashion design project is embedded in a social-economic context of manufacturing and craftsmanship, in precisely the way in which this has been described by a number of social scientists, from Becker and Bourdieu to Crane and Giusti, amongst many others, was completely confirmed. The erratic step-by-step emergence of a design project, if successful, acquires a form of artistic coherence that is not predictable at any moment in the course of the process. To use Bourdieu's term, there is a form of magic at work that combines elementary sources of inspiration, some of which are consciously sought (as in my dialogue with architecture) while others simply hit you in the process (as the somewhat accidental focus on texture in the design of *Howl*), with possibilities and limitations of materials and skills, and always in a context of collaboration in which a designer depends on others – and on the affordability of their services.

Howl on display: Edition, Tokyo

Howl on display: Opening Ceremony, Tokyo

Howl on display: Persuade, Bilbao

Backstage shoot