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## **Take off your shoes!**

- floors, flows, health and hygiene in R.M. Schindler's architecture

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“As a mere product of the civilisatory urge, all shoes might be alike. Compare, however, the shoe of Japan with our western one. The former is a geometrically shaped sole, which is actively held in place by the toes. It is related to the form of the foot only by its size. It may be understood as a piece of the floor covering lifted out and carried along for protection...”

R.M. Schindler, 1935<sup>1</sup>



Japanese Geta shoes

This quote by Viennese emigré architect Rudolph M. Schindler is peculiar for at least three reasons. To begin with it is unusual for architects to write about shoes; even more so since it is a Viennese architect writing about a Japanese shoe (without ever having been in Japan). In this quote Schindler views the shoe as a mobile, transportable piece of floor. In distinction to the western shoe that covers the foot ergonomically, the "Geta" is not considered as an extended body part, but as a separating plane that protects the foot from the ground as well as the ground from the foot.

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<sup>1</sup> R.M. Schindler, "Furniture and the Modern House: A Theory of Interior Design," in: Architect and Engineer (San Francisco), vol.123, December 1935

When I was living in Japan in the mid-nineties, I was fascinated by the priority given to the floor over any possible furniture. We would sit, eat, drink, party, work and work out on the tatami floor, while our western shoes were left behind in the entrance rooms of apartments, restaurants, sometimes even shops. During my stay in Japan, I also visited Los Angeles for the first time and went to see houses of the pioneers of early 20<sup>th</sup> century's "hygiene architecture". As is well known, architecture's response to the importance of physical health in modernity has, among other things, resulted in what became an "icon" of "hygienic" architecture: white walls. While Schindler, who had come to Los Angeles in 1920, was as interested in the issue of hygiene as his colleagues at the time, his architecture differed quite a lot from theirs. When I visited Schindler's Kings Road house in Los Angeles, it struck me that it had not one white wall; rather, it made me feel like in a traditional Japanese house. Schindler's ambiguous architecture combines aspects of Japanese architecture with the everyday cleanliness and bodily health.

In the 1920s, when modern architecture started to focus on health and hygiene issues (or perhaps: when the modern discourse on health and hygiene started to focus on architecture), the cultural quest for clean environments was influenced by a number of innovations in the fields of science, technology and medicine.<sup>2</sup> Installation of refrigerators offered a solution to the problem of food conservation, so crucial in the hot climate of Los Angeles. Planning space for private (instead of communal) bathrooms, and also the use of hygienic materials and coverings became important topics for architects. Influences on the design processes now increasingly came from the writings of physicians such as Dr. Philipp Lovell:

“When we consider that we spend at least half a day's hours in the home, the importance of building a structure for health purposes is evident.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Nowadays, of course, the whole range of products designed to keep people and their households clean and healthy themselves produce various disorders (allergies, chemical sensitivity, sick building syndrome...).

<sup>3</sup> from “Care of the Body”, Philipp Lovell's regular column in the Los Angeles Times, mid 1920ies. Dr. Lovell established his Lovell Physical Culture Center in Los Angeles, which became one of the leading institutions of the new body cult in Southern California, still remarkably present there

In spring 1926, Dr. Lovell asked his friend Schindler to write a series of articles on health care in architecture for his regular column in the Los Angeles Times called “Care of the body”. One of the first topics addressed in Schindler’s six articles was air ventilation in the house:

“The usual open window creates a current of air through the room which does not efficiently affect the layers of air above the level of its lintel, below the level of its sill, and in the corners of the room. [...] To breathe polluted air most of the time, only to get a few wafts of fresh air for short periods by opening a window or two, is an unclean procedure. [...]”<sup>4</sup>

(To evaluate Schindler’s innovative approach one should bear in mind that in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century prejudices against nightly air were still common. People would rather keep their windows tightly closed and use incense in the house rather than ventilate – which is, of course, quite similar to the application of perfume against body smell instead of washing.)

In a chapter on plumbing, Schindler also imagined the future of showering in great detail:

“With the possibility of drawing water of any temperature and mixing it with soap and other ingredients before it leaves the faucet, it will be feasible to use flowing water exclusively. Both bathtub and washbowl will be replaced by fixtures built on the shower principle.”<sup>5</sup>

Schindler even argued against dark clothes because in his view they concealed dirt; in this respect, he certainly joined a modernist discourse which holds “whiteness” to be an ultimate proof of hygiene.<sup>6</sup> He also wrote that lighting bulbs should be transparently wrapped to give soft light anywhere, except in the dining

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nowadays. His thinking had a big influence on the development of modern architecture in Los Angeles.

<sup>4</sup> R. M. Schindler, “Ventilation” (“Care of the Body”), Los Angeles Times, Sunday magazine section, march 14, 1926

<sup>5</sup> R. M. Schindler, “Plumbing and Health” (“Care of the Body”), Los Angeles Times, Sunday magazine section, march 21, 1926

<sup>6</sup> While black clothing, even underwear, has long lost any connotations of hidden dirtiness, it is significant that it took until the early 21<sup>st</sup> century to find black sanitary towels on the market for menstruation hygiene.

room, where the light should reveal the perfect cleanliness and shine of the flatware and glasses.<sup>7</sup>

Generally, Schindler's writings on hygiene issues highlight the importance of the floor and of horizontality in relationship to cleanliness. Schindler's first building, the Kings Road house (Los Angeles, 1921) has an open floor plan and a flat roof, and – as an even more revolutionary aspect of the design – equally valued ateliers for wife and husband. Open fireplaces and wide glass doors allow to open the house to its patios and create an atmosphere of outdoor camping all year long. Instead of white walls, the house is built of untreated structural material, such as concrete, red wood, insulate panels and glass. Its succession of spaces is reminiscent of a traditional Japanese house, using a modular system similar to that of tatami. As in traditional Japanese architecture, structuring the walls in geometric patterns emphasizes the emptiness of the floor, which becomes the main element of the house. Not only spatially, but also socially the place was an open house, serving as a meeting point for artists, architects, and intellectuals. Even the lifestyle within the house was adopted from Japan: at parties guests had to take off their shoes and the floor became the main level of interaction.

With Rudolph Schindler and his wife Pauline, eating from the floor had nothing to do with a lack of good manners. This is nicely conveyed by a quote from John Cage, a regular visitor in the Kings Road house: “Pauline served lunch on the floor but objected to the way Balka [a guest] was using her knife and fork.” It seems that Schindler never visited Japan; his plan to work for Frank Lloyd Wright there never came true. However, visitors – among them Wright – told him about the country across the Pacific and its cultures, where the floor had such surprising values. Generally, in a Japanese house the floor is experienced as a “clean” surface for a variety of functions, which in a western way of thinking

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<sup>7</sup> Schindler even argued against pieces of art in the living space, since he believed that one would sense the person behind the work, and might thus have an unwanted stranger in the house.

would imply highly different hygienic requirements. While in the west separate horizontal levels define levels of hygiene, in Japanese architecture the floor acts as a compression of different levels.

In western hygiene culture, the floor, as the lowest part of a house or apartment, is also considered to be its dirtiest.<sup>8</sup> While in Japan fresh air is provided by horizontal ventilation through the house, in Europe and America high ceilings signify freshness of air. In western everyday practice the placement of objects high up in storage facilities signifies their higher value and also the fact that they are supposed to remain clean. Western food consumption is structured along a succession of different planes: tables provide clean surfaces for plates, which in their turn become transportable planes until the food is placed on the spoon as the smallest and most intimate surface (in distinction to chopsticks, which serve to pick the food). Tablecloths and special tissues under the plates serve as intermediary planes; chairs provide horizontal levels between floor and table. It is polite to put your hands on the table, but not your posterior or your feet.<sup>9</sup> In Japan, on the other hand, the floor is experienced as a clean surface, with tables and shoes being part of it. This difference in cultural phenomenologies of hygiene is reflected by different understandings of the shoe. While in the west the shoe is an appendix to the foot and the person, covering the former and separating the latter from the ground, the Japanese Geta shoe mentioned at the beginning of this essay is carried along as a mobile part of the floor.

Schindler's "health architecture" is marked by horizontal surfaces, by the elevation, folding and thickening of the floor. His famous Lovell Beach house built for Dr. Lovell in 1926 is based on the client's ideas about architecture. Lovell

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<sup>8</sup> To put it the other way around: "You could almost eat from the ground" is a common – yet, of course, ultimately ironic – expression to describe the obsessively clean streets in Swiss or Austrian cities.

<sup>9</sup> Bearing in mind that Schindler was a colleague and house-mate of Richard Neutra, whose architecture is generally considered to be psychoanalytically inspired, and that both men originated from the city of Freud, one might point to the therapist's couch as another horizontal surface devoted to (mental) hygiene.

advocated to prevent disease rather than fight it, by allowing people to sunbathe naked, to work-out, to sleep outdoors, by providing them with hygienic sanitation of kitchen and bathroom and good ventilation. His house is placed on columns, which not only protects the house from flooding and storms, but also creates a higher horizontal datum for a good view and privacy while living the above mentioned healthy life. The prefabricated concrete beams (Schindler stresses the fact that they are even "termite-proof") allow wide floor spans, hence create a floating hygienic floor.

Here as well as in the Kings Road house Schindler explored his concept of "space architecture", which he developed in opposition to Le Corbusier's machine architecture. Schindler highlighted spatial relationships, an understanding of architecture as a "flowing" of space inside and outside of the house.<sup>10</sup> In his view the living space should be anything but the reproduction of the order and sterile atmosphere of a furniture shop. His development of the "Schindler units" is a step in this direction: a system for modulating spatial flows into furniture. The latter should not be bound to the wall, but merge with the floor, hence compressing horizontal levels into one layer, which is three-dimensional and multi-layered in itself. In the Kings Road house even the bathtub is an extension to the floor, folding into the sink plane like a thickening of the floor. Schindler's concept of "Raummöbel" ("space furniture") picks up the Japanese understanding of the shoe as a mobile part of the floor rather than an appendix to the foot. The theoretical goal of Schindler's architecture would be a building consisting only of floor – with the walls eliminated and the furniture being nothing but thickening, doubling, tripling folds in one clean, immanent surface.

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<sup>10</sup> For further elaboration on Schindler's concept of "space architecture" see August Sarnitz: "R.M. Schindler", Rizzoli New York, 1988