

## **The benefits of Body Conscious Design**

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Designers and consumers will learn to "see" the physical pain that is built into culturally contorted objects.

Our most general question is how to get modern, industrialized cultures to be more body conscious. Within that broad concern we have narrowed our focus to exploring the role of the physical environment in promoting body awareness in everyday life. The designed environment is everywhere and interacts with our bodies—in the objects we touch, the clothes we wear, the buildings we live in, the landscapes that surround us. Design speaks to us nonverbally, directs our behavior without any written directions! The anthropologist Edward T. Hall has explained that nonverbal “formal” knowledge is particularly powerful (and hard to change) because we unconsciously absorb the lessons built into objects. Therefore, designing the physical world is a deliberate way to reinforce or change feelings, thoughts, and behavior. Specifically, we want to explore how design broadly defined can legitimate and support a body conscious way of life. If we can make the designed world, including architecture, more body friendly, we anticipate multiple benefits—in the realms of public health, psychological well being, social-cultural cooperation, sustainability, and aesthetics.

In addition to addressing the public health issues in the opening paragraph above, body awareness and efficient usage is good for the mind. That is to say, balancing the mind and nervous system with all of the other aspects of the physical body helps us psychologically, socially, and emotionally. People who tune in to their bodies experience themselves as more calm, tolerant, generous, compassionate, and empathetic with others than when they live in a mentally focused world. Biological well being becomes the basis of authority for decision-making, which has the potential to create a more cooperative, less authoritarian social life. Thus, body consciousness also brings important advantages back to community life. Moreover, body awareness plays the groundwork for sustainability; because when we are more sensitive of our own bio-social needs we have more intuitive understanding of the need for ecological balance among all of the natural forces that support life on Earth.

Additionally, body conscious design is beautiful. Body conscious design must be styled to keep in touch with its times, but it has an underlying philosophy, which means that it is not just a style. Body conscious design is beautiful because it is in harmony with the smooth, flexible, versatile bones and joints, muscles, organs, skin, glands, connective tissue and movement patterns of our bodies. Of course, varying personal preferences and changing aesthetic standards will generate many different visual looks for many different tastes. Different dimensions of the same body can be celebrated; for example, the shirt waist dress emphasizes the horizontal seam at the waist to mark the difference between the upper and lower body, whereas the princess line has long vertical seams running from hip crest to bust line, to present the body as a column. Today, body conscious design should be "cool" in some way—close, formfitting, layered, and understated—in order to fit in with current stylistic rhetoric. But no matter what the styling, in a body conscious culture we would not look at a high heel, a corset, or a chair and acknowledge the pain that they cause—only to go on to

exclaim, "but isn't it beautiful!" Designers and consumers will learn to "see" the pain that is built into such culturally contorted objects.

### *Body Conscious Design Requires Movement*

Body conscious design acknowledges the importance of movement. The body is designed for movement. Homeostasis for the organism requires continuous internal movement and external exploration of the environment. There is no perfect posture; the best posture is the next posture. Lack of movement creates a host of problems for lymph and blood circulation, joints, and organ health.

The design of the environment needs to change in order to support ease of movement. For example, smooth floors or warm floors may become a standard of body conscious design. Such changes mean that architectural educators and interior design educators both need to hear from somatic educators. Shoes and clothing also need to change to accommodate movement, and this will require changes in fashion attitude. When tools become more body conscious, as we have seen with the development of scissors and door handles, everyone ends up benefiting. The body has direct contact with furniture, especially the chair, which generally restricts movement. Furniture has a direct relationship to the body, especially the chair, which generally restricts movement. Product designers, fashion designers, and environmental designers all need a boost in body awareness in order to design a way of life around movement, flux, flow, change, rather than fixed objects.

For the environment to allow movement, patterns of authority also have to allow people to adjust themselves. Individuals must be trusted to know when they need to move without their movement being interpreted as a sign of disrespect or disorder. Thus, designing social life around movement will require changes in both policy and the physical environment. Which comes first is a chicken-and-egg problem, and we propose to start with design, even though we acknowledge the importance of attitude and the reciprocal influence of policy and design on one another. Both education and better objects are part of a body conscious lifestyle. Therefore, formulating plans regarding how to advance a range of educational and design projects will be part of our meeting.

### *The Difficulty of Changing Cultural Paradigms*

To change the chair requires changing desks, tables, and other work surfaces, which in turn challenges major cultural patterns regarding how to work, eat, and socialize. A floor-based culture has a different kind of architecture, with windows closer to the ground than the 18 inches of European architecture. A body conscious landscape designer brings some planting beds up to waist height, and rethinks outdoor seating to include lounge chairs and new kind of amphitheaters, thinks about scent and sound as well as the surfaces that will be touched by feet and hands.

Even if beneficial, these changes will not come automatically, because they require fundamental cultural change. The anthropologist Edward T. Hall describes three kinds of knowledge—rational-technical (for example, what we learn in school), informal (what

acquaintances tell us outside of school), and formal (what we learn nonverbally by copying others). Body conscious design is rationally easy to understand, although ironically our educational system is probably the most separated from the body. Surprisingly, departments of architecture, interior design and architecture, industrial design and product design—not to mention landscape architecture and urban planning—pay almost no attention to the body. Recent academic scholarship has been about “the body” as an indicator of something else, rather than about the direct experience of the designer’s bodies and the users’ bodies. How can we teach body conscious design through direct experience? Informally—through family and friends, colleagues and coworkers, and “the buzz”—body conscious design still needs to work its way into every sector of society—educational, commercial, governmental, military, and religious.

Body conscious design is particularly important at the formal level because it is the forms of culture that communicate, instruct, and socialize its members to cultural norms without the need to say one word. Formal knowledge is the hardest to change because it is most removed from conscious awareness. The difficulty of changing an unconscious practice (like chair sitting) includes resistance to the subject by dismissing it as absurd or trivial. Nevertheless, even formal knowledge can and does change. Bringing a subject into conscious awareness is a first step. After that, through the influences of social movements, science, education, and art, new ways of thinking and acting can emerge culturally and eventually be instituted in laws, in codes, in professional guidelines and standards.