

## ESSAY

# ARCHITECTURE FOR THE BODY

**Are there truly parallels between fashion designs and architectural designs, as is often claimed? Crucial are the central aspects of movement and flexibility. A dynamically shaped building remains static, even when its inhabitants move in the space. In fashion design, the movements of the human body are directly related to the flexibility of the materials.**

BETTINA KÖHLER Anglo-American fashion designer Charles James, born in 1906, received the Neiman Marcus Award for Distinguished Service in the Field of Fashion in 1953. The jury based James' distinction on a surprising argument: As a designer he lends fashion genius and immortality with his wonderful, timeless designs. Immortality and timelessness have never been considered particular characteristics of fashion. Fashion, quite the opposite, fascinates due to its volatility and irrational changes. It has long offered, through that, a base for enthusiastic agreement or culturally-pessimistic critique.

Fashion designers are aware of this fact. Charles James and the two-generations-older Madeleine Vionnet both attempted, in extremely different ways, to arrive at timelessness in their design and production processes: A timelessness whose realization is visible in the architecture of their clothing. Nonetheless, the claim that there are many parallels in the design and production of architecture and fashion usually goes back to interpreters and critics; not, however, to the fashion designers themselves.

### Architectural shaping

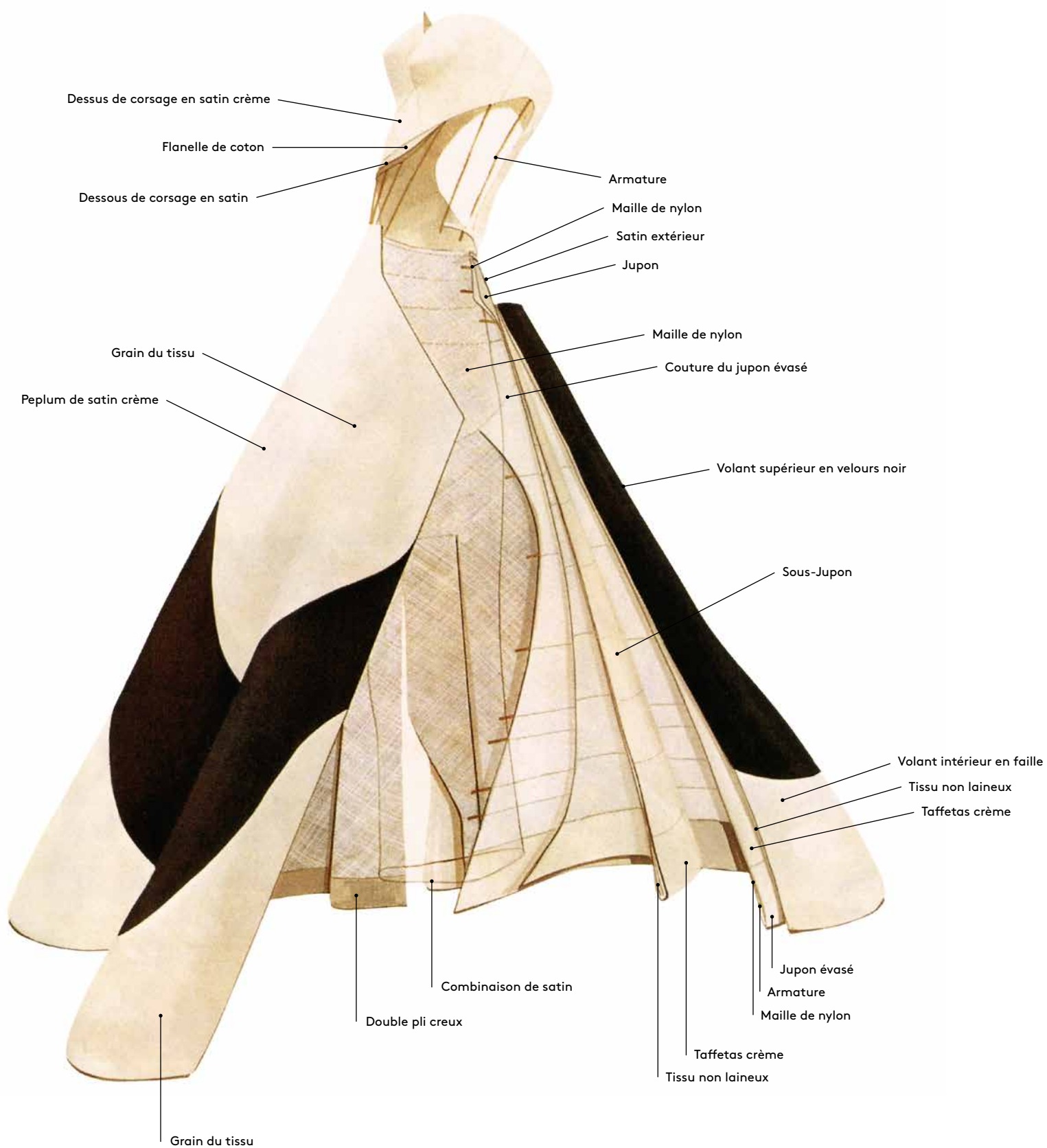
What is behind the claim that there are parallels between architectural and fashion design? What concepts about the design of an article of clothing, about its structure, its dynamic space? What ideas about the relationship between the textiles tailored in abstract forms and the individual body measurements? Charles James experimented in the design and production processes with self-developed dummies, substructures, seams, and mainly, with an unconventional layering and connection of materials. This gave rise to flexible yet also form-fitting clothing. An outstanding example of this is the Clover Leaf gown designed in 1953 for Mrs. William Randolph (Austine) Hearst Jr., which James viewed as his legacy. Harold

Koda, curator of this summer's major Charles James retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, summarized the special features of this ball gown in the concept of "architectural shaping".

*The supporting underskirts are not the usual boned hoops of flexible wands but multi-layered canopies of boning, net, buckram, Pellon, and canvas sandwiched into shape. [...] James treated the fixed contours of these engineered understructures as an architectural form that he ornamented without constraint, like a milliner trimming a hat. He pieced together a gown's surface by juxtaposing materials that are not especially compatible with each other or with the cantilevered and form-retaining volumes he desired. [...] The gown's graphic power is possible because the seams that join the textiles are freed from structural requirements by the ingenious support system below. [...] James thus elevated fashion to fine art, merging the science of engineering with aesthetics. The result is architecture for the body. (Harold Koda, 2014, p. 193)*

The Clover Leaf gown met with James' claim of offering tailored evening gowns that respond to the demand of new fashion with movements of the wearer "against and in the flow of the material", radiating in the surroundings. The skirt, resting on the hips, was not meant to touch the floor; instead, while the wearer was dancing, it should rise and fall like the skirt of a figure skater in a pirouette. Despite the gown's relative stiffness, the dancer was meant to experience movement in this glamorous shell as entirely comfortable, and mediate precisely this sensation to the audience.

In order to yield this type of spectacular result in the manufacture of "architecture for the body", steady professional development is required in an area whose borders are merely grazed in the current discussion about the parallels of architecture and fashion. Coordinating the movements of the materials



Drawing of the Clover Leaf gown  
by Charles James, 1953.



**Clover Leaf gown by  
Charles James, 1953, worn  
by Mrs. Hearst.**



**Robe dit Quatre Mouchoir  
by Madeleine Vionnet, 1920.**

**Gown by Madeleine Vionnet,  
in "Vogue France", May 1932.**



among themselves, the power of gravity on the materials, and the powers with and against the moving body are at the center of fashion design. Regardless of what is designed, whether a tailored ball gown or a serially repeatable two-piece outfit, whether festive glamour or everyday nonchalance are the goals of a design: the decision of the point or the area on which the dress will be “hung” on the body, and how it moves and is moved from there, is essential in the use and effect of fashion. Those who enter a tent do not move the tent, but those who brush against a dress immediately set it in motion.

Madeleine Vionnet interpreted the “architecture” of clothing in the 1920s and 1930s in an entirely different way than Charles James did. Her declared goal was the freedom of body and material, the refrain from the dress’ conventional division into front and back sides, which necessarily leads to a side seam, and the complete renunciation of supportive substructure.

James worked with several layers, Vionnet, on the contrary, with one or two layers that remain visible as such. In several spectacular evening gowns from the early 1930s, only a single flowing layer of material came directly into contact with the body. All that was “inside” of the dress were strategically placed bands making it possible to fix it on the body, but which could move in a certain space. Vionnet’s distinguished significance as designer of flexible material spaces is shown no least in that she established the cut at an angular run of thread as a working method and realized it masterly. With that, she came closer to her ideal of a seamless dress volume surrounding the body. She led the dress narrowly around the upper body to then, in a flowing transition, open it in volumes that remained nevertheless harmonious in movement around the leg. She fastened folds and draping only to the extent that they always maintained a leeway that

was harmoniously balanced with the movements of the wearer and the own-power of the dress. The cut at an angular run of thread lent the material bounce. Vionnet also used this in drapes and turns so that the geometry of the construction remained invisible and the resulting look moved “naturally” and in no way appeared forced.

#### Metaphoric parallels

The design of dynamic movement, which was considered an identification of modernity and progress since the end of the nineteenth century at the latest – brought to mind here is Sigfried Giedion’s *Mechanization takes Command* – were central for James as well as Vionnet. Their utterly different approaches are conceivable as concepts in fashion design until today. Even when one must admit that under the influence of a frenetic acceleration of production the demands for quality of materials and their precise working to a moving and beautiful space around the body have sunk dramatically.

With a view to the theme of movement, it becomes clear that the claim of parallels between fashion and architecture can only remain metaphoric. A façade woven from metal bands, an interior cast of synthetics, are only metaphorically “flowing” and “textile” or a “movable shell”. In reality, all of these elements are static and offer the perceptive gaze, at best, an impression of flexibility.

The recently observable markedly strong interest of architecture in fashion might be traced back less to fashion finding its raison d’être in the constant change of forms, than the images and possibilities preserved in the tailor’s shop and in textile art: Such as the image of a tailored shell rather than a standardized, neutral architecture based purely on calculation. Or new production techniques for flexible, space-shaping elements that integrate pattern and ornaments and thereby contribute to the individualization of a space.

Should one take seriously the concepts of the creations presented here as challenges to architectural design, then this would mean not only according the flexibility, comfort, strength, and aesthetics of textiles in interplay with other materials a much larger place (again). It would additionally demand opening spaces to individual awareness and dynamic movement in which purposefulness and elegance are the goal; not the piling up of modularized boxes in which the fundamental algorithm generates simply the appearance of variation and liveliness.

#### Literature

Harold Koda, Jan Glier Reeder (eds.), *Charles James: Beyond fashion*, New York 2014. – Jérôme Savignon, *L’esprit Vionnet*, Université de la Mode, Lyon 1994. – Brooke Hodge, *Skin + bones. Parallel practices in fashion and architecture*, Los Angeles 2007. – Deborah Fausch, Paulette Singley, Rodolphe El-Khoury, Zvi Efrat (ed.), *Architecture: In Fashion*, New York 1994.





Some façade textures and structures recall woven and knitted patterns of fabrics.

Knitted dress from the fall/winter collection 2014/15 by Xess & Baba, Zurich.  
Different colors of Swisspearl façade slating on the old-age and nursing home in Hasle-Rüegsau by Opus Architekten (2007/08).



