



THE DEVIL WEARS ~~PRADA~~ BLACK?

The Medium of Uniform

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It should not come as a surprise that many people familiar with architects associate them with wearing the color black. Black is professional, utilitarian, sleek, easy. Throughout history, and in modern times, black has been used to signify a distinction between people. Those in mourning wear black to showcase their emotions, and in the past couple decades “edgy” teenagers wear black to rebel against the status quo. Whether or not someone cares about their appearance, clothes are a form of self-expression and they influence people’s first impression of others. Everyone has opinions on clothes, and in fact could be considered a form of architecture and for that matter even metamedia. Clothes are carefully constructed, intentionally paired, subject to fads and whims, and protect us, much like architecture. In fact, many times, an architect’s clothing and personality dictate the relationship between a particular client and the designer, and could affect whether or not someone gets a project. Clothes, and choice of, are tools within an architect’s arsenal that are rarely

seen as a tool for change and are often considered nuisances. Choosing clothes to present oneself in a particular manner is extremely important. But before reaching for those black shirts and pants, think about the ramifications of doing so.

When wearing black, we are comparing ourselves to those who are known for wearing all black: haute couture designers, “scene” kids, mourners, famous architects, and the Catholic clergy. The Catholic clergy has been wearing this distinctive dress since 1215 CE. It was originally intended to catch people’s eyes in the street in case they needed a priest, and to remind the priest to “die to themselves” in order to better serve their God and teach The Word. It was not intentionally meant to elevate the status of the priest, however, due to the power the Catholic Church gained throughout the centuries, the black cassock or garb began to represent more than its original intention. It began to represent a group of people who primarily serve the wealthy. In regards to the 15th and 16th century Northern Europe, most

notably modern-day Germany and Martin Luther, the Catholic Church sold indulgences to the wealthy so the rich could avoid penance and/or punishment for their sins. From the 15th to the 18th century in France, under the “Ancien Regime,” the clergy partook in government affairs within the first estate where they had one of three votes, the other two being the nobility and the common men, where the clergy always voted in favor of the nobility and because of this,

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were exempt from taxes and enjoyed an elevated social status. In 16th century England, Henry VIII and all of England were excommunicated from the Catholic Church by Pope Clement VII due to the king divorcing his first wife Catherine of Aragon in order to marry Ann Boleyn. This excommunication led to riots in England against the king, and through fear tactics the Catholic Church grew in power which caused people to have more loyalty to the pope than their own king.

The Catholic Church is not only strongly entwined within history and

power structures, but also to architecture. Every architect learns and visits many cathedrals, chapels, and even St. Peter's Basilica, and is familiar with the general history of the church that built these monuments. When architects wear black they are inherently grouping themselves with the Catholic clergy and their history. By wearing black, we equate ourselves with a group of people who advertise that they translate the word of the divine for the common man. We group ourselves with those that, for centuries, served the rich and sought power for themselves.

Another notorious group that wears black and primarily serves the rich, and those closely associated with them, are haute couture designers. When high fashion designers accompany celebrities to award shows or galas, or after their own seasonal show, it is common for the designer to wear something black. Take the Met Gala for instance, the most exclusive fashion event of the year. A ticket for this event typically runs \$35,000 a person, and tables range from \$200,000 to \$300,000, and celebrities often spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on outfits for this exorbitant event. Designers accompanying these celebrities tend to wear black or extremely muted tones in comparison to their counterparts. Vera Wang in 2015 wore a black, floor length dress; Jean-Paul Gaultier wore black in 2007; and Olivier Rousteing wore all black in 2015. It is also customary for designers, when they come out for the finale of their show, to be wearing all or primarily black. This can range depending on the fashion city and the type of fashion itself, but designers often wear black turtlenecks, suits, shirts, or entire

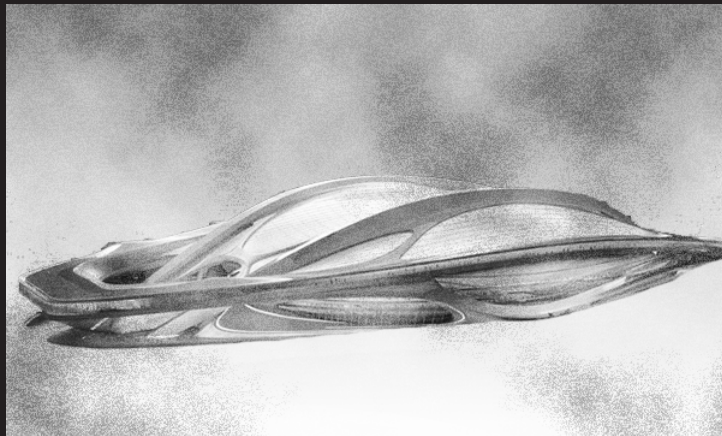
ensembles. One could argue that high-end designers do not necessarily work for the rich because their designs trickle down and some forms of them end up in department stores for the average middle class citizen to buy. However, aside from their seasonal shows, haute couture houses work directly and solely for those rich enough to pay for one of a kind designs, or for the designs featured in their shows. Success in this field is not measured in sales or cultural impact, but in how many celebrities and which celebrities the designer has dressed for events. For the majority of Americans, the only time they see these designs are in the news, videos taken by celebrities attending these events, and reality television.

Additionally, these people work in an industry that is extremely wasteful, does not value human life, and values quantity over quality. By no reason should an architect want to be equated or compared to these people. This industry accounts for eight percent of global climate impacts, and has a reputation for using overseas sweatshops.

Architecture is currently trying to do its part in decreasing carbon footprints: buildings and their construction are responsible for around forty percent of carbon emissions. We should not follow in the footsteps of people who do not care at all; apathy and lack of information got us to this point of being on the precipice of a climate catastrophe. We need to do our part in fixing what we have broken and having a high and mighty haute couture designer mentality will not get us to where we need to be within the decade. Architects try to value human life, the user experience and the people their designs affect. Why are we, as a community, taking after people who only care about the rich and treat everyone else like they are disposable? The majority of architectural projects are either for the average person or are to be used by the non-wealthy. We should not try to be stoic and detached from our work, and who it affects, because in order to create a design that truly helps and serves a population one needs to understand, meet, and empathize with people.

Famous architects who are known for wearing all black often never see their work realized or are criticized because their work only focuses on form and not on sustainability; user experience; or easy to maintain buildings, three factors that have become very important to the architecture community, or are at least very important to architectural educators and students. Zaha Hadid is an amazing architect that stood up for herself in a very white and male dominated field. However, her work and methods are not necessarily where architecture seems to be headed in recent years. To fully direct the profession to be more conscientious of others and the environment we should not look to her or her work. For example, her proposal in Japan for its Olympic stadium was deemed “wildly expensive” and “insensitive to the site.” On that very same project, many of the designed rows of seating could not view the 10m diving board which was to host eight Olympic events. This does not mean it was not a great design overall, but for the everyday architect trying to create better environments for people with small budgets, she is not a rubric to follow. Furthermore, Hadid has been viewed as cold and unwelcoming to clients and users, which could be a product of wanting to be respected for her accomplishments and ideas in an, at times, misogynistic field. Zaha Hadid is a great example to follow if money is not an issue for a client and a grand Olympic-sized, grandiose monument to architecture is the goal, but that is not the reality for ninety-nine percent of architects. Wearing black, like Hadid, equates ourselves with her, her work, and her way of thinking which is not something to be emulated especially around ev-

eryday clients. When the press gives attention and time to starchitects who wear black, the public takes notice, so by wearing black we are subject to not only the public's opinions of these individuals, but also to them assuming we think and



act just like them because we wear the same clothing. Many starchitects and those who praise them focus entirely on forms and treat money like it is not an object. This way of thinking sounds great and something to aim for, however, it is problematic and perpetuates the stereotype that we, as a profession, only serve or want to serve the wealthy.

Buildings and designing them are expensive, and it is easy to fall into the routine of only caring about those who pay for it, but that routine has allowed for thirty-eight percent of carbon emissions to be a product of buildings and their constructions. Now, not all of this is directly attributable to architects, but in schools students are taught to consider all avenues and ways of thinking, so why does our profession not? Architects can make a huge difference in the issue of climate change, but the need to be taken seriously and achieve some level of prestige blinds many from the real issues that our society is struggling with and the fact that the profession could really make a difference in this realm. The way of thinking taught in architecture schools is completely thrown out in practice, which has allowed designers to develop tunnel vision on fame and praise, instead of being socially responsible. The first step towards this goal is to stop wearing all black. Wearing black carries these ideals and the “sleek, professional” look that comes with it puts architects on a pedestal where they

only have to care about the design of the project, and not the social or environmental ramifications of it, because that is deemed below them.

In conclusion, by wearing black, architects equate themselves with people who have histori-

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cally been known for serving the rich and taking advantage of the poor for financial gain; and it places the architect on a pedestal where only the design is considered important. This community has been known for being problematic and closed towards females, minorities, and new ideas. We

are trying to change our ways and the first step towards a better community is to start with individuals' outlooks, and wearing black prevents architects from being proactive. Wearing black separates the designer from their work and from those around them. It makes little sense as to why someone would not want to be a part of their own design. Being a part of one's work lets the architect take pride in their work. It also allows for the architect to take responsibility for any shortcomings in the design and programming, creating a more proactive community. Wearing colors allows for personality to show through, which is something for the client to relate to and can increase a client's comfort level, creating better interpersonal interactions and possibly preventing constant design changes. Architects should strive to be as personable as possible; students do it during school to decrease the risk of being destroyed during a critique, so why has the profession lost this skill? All in all, wearing black prevents architects from being proactive, personable with clients and the public, and from taking responsibility for their actions.

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