Chapter 15
The Alchemist Architect:
Towards Exploring Materials

Esen Gökçe Özdamar
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7189-3633
Tekirdağ Namık Kemal University, Turkey

ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on the growing interest of many artists, architects, and designers regarding the exploration of handmade materials. Today, designers focus on gaining experience with new materials. These experimental material investigations for discovering the nature of the material can be placed in the intersection of homo faber, human production, and technology. The transition between alchemists, artisans and technicians has been expressed by Jacques Ellul, Lewis Mumford, and Jose Ortega y Gasset. What kind of transformation can these contemporary quests in design create and what experiences are involved in the practices and theoretical integration of the senses in material encounters and produced by haptic experience? The aim is to figure out the possible outcomes of this inquiry of designers through the act of making and how these experiences might contribute to future design pedagogies in architecture and interior design. Therefore, deriving from experimental approaches in working with unknown materials, this chapter explores the need for these experimental investigations.

INTRODUCTION

The above title presents a fundamental contradiction with the Industrial Revolution into which today's architect and designer have fallen. For many years, a split between form and matter has been applied and perceived in architecture, especially following the Industrial Revolution. Architects have preferred to mention and refer to form instead of material in their profession. In this context, materials have been discussed in terms of their constructive traits and possibilities, rather than their theoretical openings (Lloyd Thomas, 2007).

Deriving from these issues, this chapter involves a cross-disciplinary approach to the theory of making, exploring the emergence of material by chance and in an alchemist way. The material here is understood in terms of a physical and spiritual object and process. Its relationship with the alchemist architect and

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the reason for the designer's loss of the body with a focus on and relation with material activism are the subheadings of the proposal.

In "The Secret Lives of Buildings," Hollis mentions that architects dream and feel that their buildings are concrete in the sense that they resist decay or collapse and will always be in good form, due to the hope that the buildings represent the architect's "genius" (Hollis, 2009). However, material is finite; it decays and transforms into another form of energy. Material is something that is in transition and flux, in an evolving state, which gains its different meanings through its interaction with human and other living beings.[1]

Similarly, "categorization by building materials and architectural form aside, architecture begins to crumble the moment it is fixed and 'finished' being built on site; and the process of deterioration continues throughout the life of the building […] Once a building is finished being built, it begins its life; and as with all life, the process of ending begins as well," as "any sense of permanence is but an illusion" (Hornstein, 2011).

The designer approaches nature as an intellectual observer, and through grasping and capturing their potentials according to a purpose-oriented function or its intrinsic knowledge or tacit knowledge and perception as an alchemist, who is in direct dialogue with the essence of matter and its transformation. In this aspect, does the designer discover or invent a design, or to what extent can a modern designer be an alchemist who discovers possibilities and sensations of life through touching the core of the matter and the material? In other words, what does an "alchemist designer" invent or discover?

Alvaro Siza mentions that "architects don't invent anything" but "they transform reality" (Frampton, 1995). According to Kenneth Frampton, who underlines this quote in "Studies in tectonic culture: The poetics of construction in nineteenth and twentieth century architecture," Siza's aphorism blurs "the nature of invention and originality," similarly to Picasso's statement, "I do not seek, I find." However, this originality implies a "circular design process" and a "responsive transformation" with unpredictability (Frampton, 1995).

However, in our contemporary digital age, a growing interest in experimenting with materials and reshaping them in terms of their different emerging forms and effects is held by many designers, as well as an interest in materials' effects on perception and our senses through hapticity, kinaesthesia, and acoustics, besides their visual effects. Designers have been experimenting and "playing" with new materials and design processes, and they are engaged with not only building materials with recipes but are interested in a more arbitrary and ambiguous design process through exploring, active observation and extending the limits of the design of materials. Based on this discussion, this chapter focuses on the exploration of handmade materials by artists, architects and designers. In our contemporary society, what has become a triggering point for new explorations with unknown and indeterminate materials for the designer? Today, many artists, designers and architects focus on gaining experience in the making of "new" materials. Works made of Maria Viftrup's TextileLab Amsterdam's bioplastics, Sammy Jobbins' wearable architecture made from kombucha or similar experiments with laboratory-grown bacteria or organisms are a few of these emerging examples. Alternatively, accessories and clothing made from leathers of fruit, tempeh, mycelium or high-tech production of spider silk by Simon Peers and Nicholas Godley appear as tendencies to experience the relationship between material and form, rather than seeking a material.

Although these discoveries are extremely diverse, experimental material investigations for discovering the nature of materials can be evaluated in the intersection between homo faber, human production, and technology, as defined by Ortega y Gasset. These acts of activism, today called "material activism,"