Reading Response #21 – “Architecture without Body, Logic and Sex”

Diana I. Agrest’s essay suggests the woman’s body has been repressed and excluded from the symbolic order of the body in architecture. Architects of the Renaissance period and beyond have referenced the male body in their abstraction of the “perfect” forms for structures, usurping the woman’s power of reproduction in their representations. She begins with a discussion of the “Vitruvian Man”: the notion of historical links between the male form and harmony/perfection found in nature. According to Agrest, man was thought to have had perfect natural proportions; architects attempted to reproduce this in their buildings.

She goes on to discuss a number of influential thinkers and architects from the Renaissance. Filarete links architecture to the human figure directly, referring to buildings as living bodies; the architect can be said to have “given birth” to his building. In that sense, Agrest argues that the figure of the architect becomes feminized, taking over the role of the mother in procreation. This usurpation of a woman’s role by a male architect is described as “architectural transsexuality” (the architect simultaneously represses the form of a woman’s body while taking on the characteristics of a mother). She goes as far as to claim the woman is “suppressed, repressed, and replaced” (pg 188).

Finally, Agrest argues that the classical architectural idea of the city as a body represents a closed, unified system, while the modern city must deal with the representation of a fragmented body. The architect can no longer mirror his own body onto a building or the city: the system has been broken, and architecture can no longer be recognized as a whole.

1) Why must the notion of body be associated to a gender? Is Agrest reading too far into potential metaphors which may in reality not exist?

2) Is the fragmented body permanently dislocated, or can it be reassembled? Is the reassembled body different from the original in a potentially advantageous way?