

## ARCHISMITHING: JEWELLERS WHO MAKE BUILDINGS AND BUILDINGS THAT MAKE JEWELLERY

Andrew Last

Colleague Col Fay and I have a handful of things in common. Among that list is a shared interest in architecture and jewellery. Col is currently a master of fine arts candidate in the Otago Polytechnic School of Art. Her research project "Body is Architecture" examines the human body as a central point of reference in both jewellery and architecture. I am currently the head of the jewellery department in the same institution. My partner Bron and I have just about completed our second owner-designed and -built house. This essay looks for common ground between two diverse jewellery practices within the context of the work on this house.

### THE FUNCTIONALIST ARCHITECTURAL AESTHETIC

Two early 20th-century German writers, Adolph Loos and Walter Benjamin, wrote critically of the architecture of their time. In an excerpt from the journal *Neue Freie Presse* (1898), Loos wrote:

to the architect all materials are of equal value, but are not uniformly suitable for all of his tasks. ...The architect's general task is to provide a warm, homely space. Carpets are warm and homely. He decides for this reason to spread out one carpet on the floor and to hang up four to form the four walls. But you cannot build a house out of carpets. Both the carpet on the floor and the tapestry require a structural frame to hold them in the correct place. To invent this frame is the architect's second task.<sup>1</sup>



Figure 1: *Last-Lowe House* interior (photograph by the author).

Bron and I have designed the Last-Lowe house to be warmed by virtue of its passive-solar efficient design. Our choice of materials reflects our ideas concerning sustainability as in this instance the interior walls are made of recycled carpets, over which an earth plaster will be applied. The design of the house is tailored to our specific requirements of a home.

The prominent critic Walter Benjamin wrote in observation of the late 19th-century bourgeois interior that “to live is to leave traces”<sup>2</sup>. The work of both writers – Benjamin and Loos – is of a time and place concurrent with the advent of modernism. In 1929, Le Corbusier was completing what has become recognised as the embodiment of modernism, namely the *Villa Savoye*. This work can be seen as a response aimed against Loos and Benjamin’s observation of the architectural vernacular of the time.

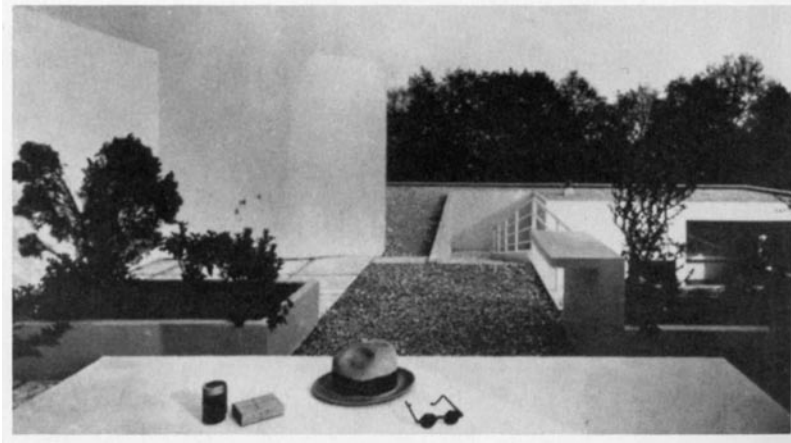


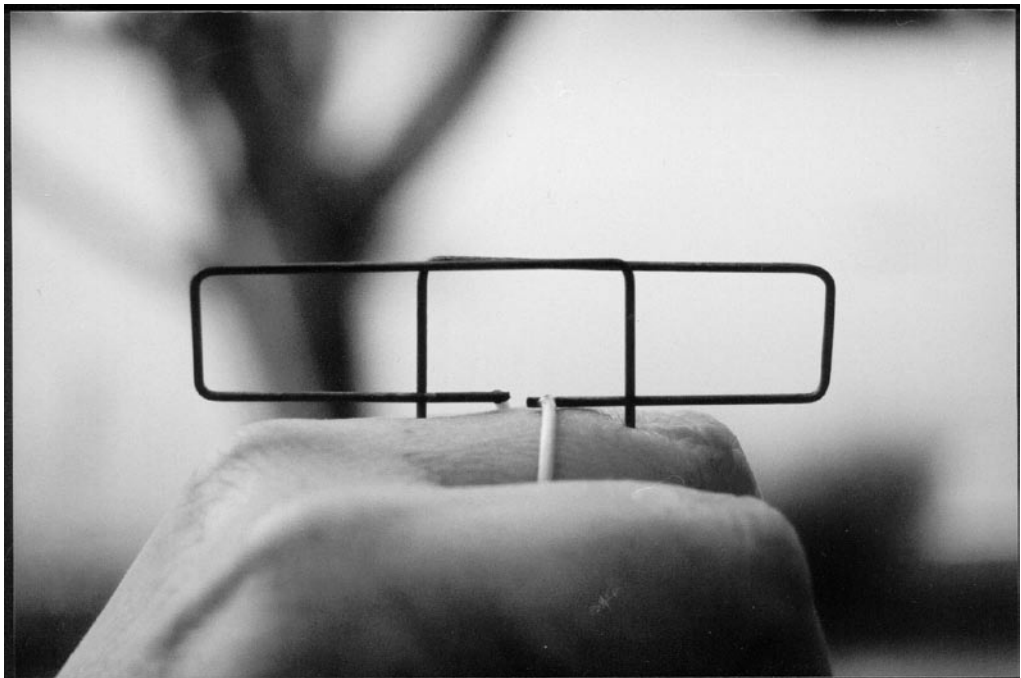
Figure 2: Le Corbusier, *Villa Savoye* at Poissy, 1928 (image courtesy of © Fondation Le Corbusier & Adagp – société des auteurs dans les arts graphiques et plastiques - photographie L2 (17)48 (c)FLC/ADAGP, 2008).

Le Corbusier considered himself to be first and foremost an artist<sup>3</sup>. His photographic representations of his architecture are therefore as much his artwork as the buildings themselves. In this photograph taken by Le Corbusier of the *Villa Savoye* roof garden, the trace of habitation was the only evidence allowed of the relationship between structure and occupant. For Le Corbusier purity of architectural form was valued well above the pragmatics of domestic utility. With this idealistic point of view the human presence was considered a ‘stain’ on the architectural form.

Like Le Corbusier, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe was one of the architects who defined the International Style. Van der Rohe’s *Farnsworth House* (1945-51), regarded as an iconic masterpiece of modernist architecture, is a domestic scale building also embodying the International Style. The steel beams clearly articulate the bones of the building’s structure and the glass walls constitute the skin.

Van der Rohe was commissioned to build the house by a prominent Chicago-based kidney specialist Dr Edith Farnsworth. Farnsworth briefed Van der Rohe to design the house as if it were for himself. Indeed, there is little concession to the needs of Farnsworth or of any human body. At the time of construction the house drew wide criticism, such as

...they [the architects in question] are promoting unlivability, stripped down emptiness, lack of storage space and therefore lack of possessions. ...so, you see, this well-developed movement has social implications because it affects the heart of our society – the home...three or four pieces of furniture placed along arbitrary pre-ordained lines; room for only a few books and one painting at precise and permanent points; no children, no dogs, extremely meager kitchen facilities – nothing human that might disturb the architect’s composition.<sup>4</sup>



## JEWELLERY INFORMED BY ARCHITECTURE

In response to *Farnsworth House*, Col Fay's *Farnsworth Ring* reinserts the human body into the design. The skin of the hand confers an implied surface to the bones of the ring's or the building's skeletal outline. Col's work simultaneously acknowledges the attraction of pure modernist form and the problematics of modernist architecture when it comes to sheltering the human body.

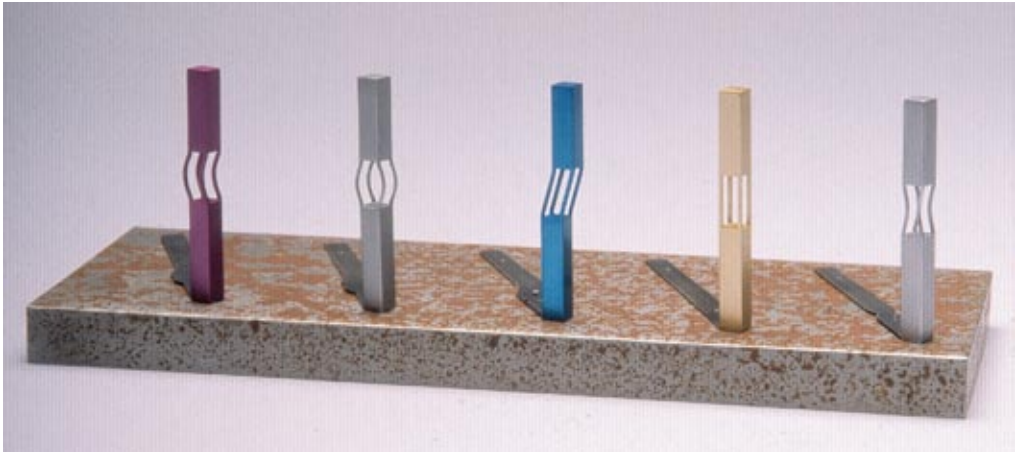


Figure 5: Andrew Last, *Building Brooches*, 1988, aluminium, steel and gold, 7 x 25 x 10 cm (photograph by James Cant).

My work entitled *Building Brooches* was made while I was working from a studio located in Melbourne's central business district. Similar to Col's *Farnsworth Ring*, the brooches respond to the sterility of modernist architecture, in this case the skyscrapers of Melbourne's cityscape. The archetypal rectilinear form is disturbed, anthropomorphising the form of the skyscraper into shapes reminiscent of stances of the human body.

### MODERNIST INFLUENCES ON CONTEMPORARY JEWELLERY (A PURSUIT FOR PURITY OF FORM)

My education at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology during the mid 1980s was derived from a model of arts education established by the Bauhaus and brought to Australia by predominantly European practitioners. The formal aesthetic of modernism were still palpably enshrined in the Gold and Silversmithing Department and the craft rigour of a rouge-polished surface was acknowledged but most often discouraged as a reflective distraction from the form of the jewellery. The human body was at most a peripheral reference alongside the almost totally self-sufficient, autonomous jewellery object.

Images on left

(top) Figure 3: Mies Van der Rohe, *Farnsworth House*, Plano, Illinois, 1945-51 (photograph by Jack E Boucher in the public domain, see: [http://toolsserver.org/~daniel/WikiSense/CheckUsage.php?i=Mies\\_van\\_der\\_Rohe\\_photo\\_Farnsworth\\_House\\_Plano\\_USA\\_I.jpg&w=\\_100000](http://toolsserver.org/~daniel/WikiSense/CheckUsage.php?i=Mies_van_der_Rohe_photo_Farnsworth_House_Plano_USA_I.jpg&w=_100000)).

(bottom) Figure 4: Col Fay, *Farnsworth Ring*, 2006, steel and sterling silver, 3 x 4 x 2cm (photograph by the artist).



Figures 6 & 7: Andrew Last, *Tensegrity Neckpiece*, 2006, aluminium and stainless steel (photographs by the author).

My *Tensegrity Neckpiece* of 2006 is a response to Kenneth Snelson's sculpture. Snelson developed the structural system from explorations into architectonic form in conjunction with architect F Buckminster Fuller. My work transposes a tensegrity structure into a jewellery form and format, a chain of repeat units assembled into a ring to be worn around the neck. The work exists primarily as a form in space. When worn, the body becomes a host to the work rather than being adorned by it.

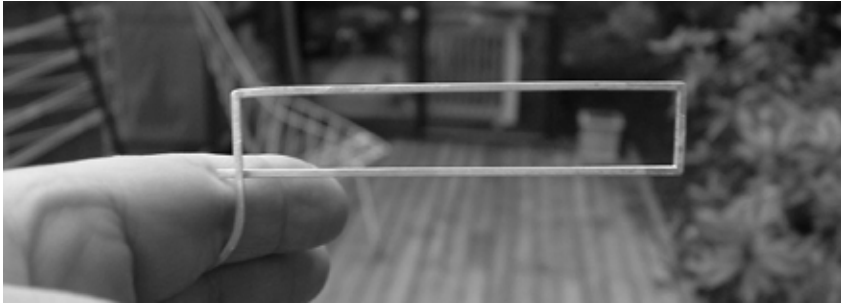


Figure 8: Col Fay, *Ring Departing the Body*, 2007, sterling silver, 3 x 5 x 0.2 cm (photograph by the artist).

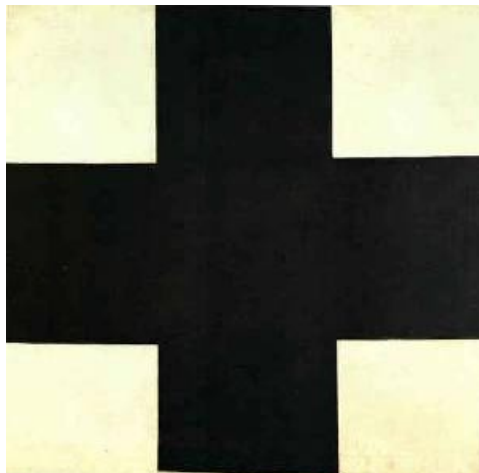


Figure 9: Kasimir Malevich, *Black Cross*, 1923 (Russian State Museum, St. Petersburg, public domain, see [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Black\\_Cross.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Black_Cross.jpg)).



Figure 10: Andrew Last, *Soft Cross Brooch* worn on the body 2004, aluminium, 5 x 5 x 0.5 cm (photograph by Col Fay).

Col Fay's *Ring Departing the Body* may be read as a jewellery work caught in the act of leaving the finger on its way to becoming an autonomous object. In a pursuit of absolute purity of form, Col has reduced the plan of *Farnsworth House* to its essential rectangle. The work questions the value of a jewellery object when considered in isolation from its fundamental role as body adornment.

## JEWELLERY INFLUENCED BY SUPREMATIST DESIGN

Kasimir Malevich exhibited his Suprematist *Black Cross* in the 0.10 Exhibition of 1915 in Petrograd (now St Petersburg). His pursuit of form devoid of any representational association preceded similar concerns held by modernist architects. His ultimate aim was to reduce the form to such a condition of essential purity that it would become autonomous, leave the constraints of the canvas and exist in its own realm.



Figure 11: Andrew Last, *Soft Cross Brooches*, 2004, aluminium, 5 x 5 x 0.5 cm each (photograph by the author).

I made the *Soft Cross Brooches* with very little consideration of their form. The cross was an intuitive decision to expedite a technical investigation of welding on a jewellery scale. I had just purchased a very expensive welder and I wanted to play with my new toy. When I had completed the *Soft Cross* series I asked Col to photograph the work worn by myself. Although I was quite pleased with the work that I made, it was from a viewpoint blinkered by technical satisfaction. Col had always sensed that the series were strong jewellery works, somehow different to other works of mine that she had seen. During our collaboration for a recent seminar presentation, Col suggested we look again at this work and for the first time I 'fessed up' to the true origins of the work's identity. The form is an indirect reference to Malevich's *Black Cross* and the specific site on the upper arm is a reference to a colleague's self portrait with a black cross tattoo. The jewellery piece functions as a signifier of my belonging to a social order, in this case a group of visual artists who uphold Malevich as a hero. Col had interpreted the rouge-polished cross as something of a self-portrait. These were jewellery works responding primarily to me, the wearer. They spoke of me and for me.

During the course of her voracious scanning of any critical writing relevant to jewellery, Col became aware of Ted Noten, a Dutch jeweller whose work and writing are reaching contemporary jewellers across the globe. His manifesto of 2006 declares that "contemporary jewellery is dead":

It complains of a lack of attention, yet wilfully retreats into the shadows of provincial life. Here in the safe isolation of the artist studio, passions that run high are hammered into every square millimetre of material and moulded into shape. That process, characteristic for the creation of every piece of jewellery for thousands of years was kept in balance by the astute awareness of its actual calling: as an accessory that ultimately expresses the aspirations and achievements of the wearer, not those of the designer."<sup>5</sup>

While Noten's manifesto is laden with the invective typical of that format of writing it points at contemporary jewellery's lack of security as an arts discipline and suggests that jewellers should exploit that circumstance rather

than whinge about it. Col's positive response to my *Soft Cross* works may be born out by Noten's admonitions and advice to contemporary jewellers. The strength of the work is generated by its function as an adornment that, when worn, speaks of the wearer's place in society.

Col and my common interest in architecture, especially that of the modernist movement, has a clearly discernable influence on our jewellery; our work as contemporary jewellers share a quest for purity of form at the risk of dislocation from the fundamental referent: the human body. According to Ted Noten we may be contributing to the death of contemporary jewellery and we are victims of our discipline's lack of security within the context of the visual arts. Noten's call for jewellers to respond to the wearers of jewellery rather than the egotism of the designer echo critical observations of modernist architecture still relevant despite their age of a hundred years by now.

I have been asked whether I include my house building projects as part of my practice. Of course, my jewellery and architecture design are inseparably informed by the same understanding of form, function and making. As works of art the building projects reflect clarity of purpose in response to the needs and beliefs of their occupants; they reflect a functionalist architectural aesthetic. Perhaps my strongest jewellery works similarly depend on a functionalist jewellery aesthetic. I remain a modernist at heart.



Figures 12 & 13: Interior of a Col Fay house (photograph by Col Fay); and *Last-Lowe House* exterior (photograph by Vicki Watson).

**Andrew Last** is a senior lecturer and academic leader for Jewellery & Metalsmithing at Otago Polytechnic School of Art. He exhibits his jewellery, silversmithing, lighting & sculpture work internationally.

- 1 Adolf Loos, *Spoken Into the Void: Collected Essays, 1897-1900*, introduction by Aldo Rossi, trans. Jane O Newman and John H Smith (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1987).
- 2 Walter Benjamin, "Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century" in *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 155-156.
- 3 *Le Corbusier et Pierre Jeanneret: Oeuvre Complète de 1929-1934* (Zurich: H Girsberger, 1935).
- 4 Elizabeth Gordon, "The Threat to the Next America", *House Beautiful*, 95 (April 1953), 126-30, 250-51.
- 5 Ted Noten, CH2=C(CH3)C(=O)OCH3 *Enclosures and Other TN's* (Rotterdam: Gert Staal, 2006), 113-115.