

# Stalls between Walls

## *Segregated Sexed Spaces*

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Architects design buildings to order the world, embody morality, and reflect societal fantasies. Once built, designed spaces are occupied and inform the way that occupants of those environments think of themselves; the spaces we subjectively create then create us as occupying subjects. For this reason, buildings can be used as mirrors with which we can examine the way we want to see both ourselves and others. Both our desires for an ideal world and our anxieties about the experienced world can be read through the way we parse space, separate it into different functions, and then arrange these spaces in relation to one another. Public bathrooms are arguably the most divided and divisive rooms within buildings, making them ideal sites to investigate how architectural boundaries segregate rooms according to gender. Divided into stalls, public bathrooms keep their occupants from crossing sexual boundaries.

Buildings give materiality to the behavior that we consider orderly and, ultimately, enforce this order. Policing (manifested in public bathrooms as architectural partitions) necessitates a criminal, which in the case of bathrooms is formlessness. My pursuit of this idea is not to prove guilt or innocence but to understand how formlessness participates in our construction as subjects. Through the writings of thinkers such as Georges Bataille, Rosalind Krauss, Dennis Hollier, and Mark Cousins, I have come to understand formlessness as a process where boundaries dissolve, a process in which the distinction between subjects and objects, as well as that between subjects, loses clarity. In public bathrooms the policing of formlessness creates distance from and borders between us and dirt (subject and object) as well as us and other users of the bathroom (subject and subject). I explore these ideas separately and then, in conclusion, as parts of the same anxiety.

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Bathrooms are the sites we have designated for our bodies to return to dirt (the landscape). Hair, urine, feces, blood, saliva, semen, and vomit are all ruptures in the fantasy that our bodies are seamless extensions of our subjective will. These liquid moments of explicit entropy show us that we are fleshy bodies contingent on a world that we cannot completely control. Within the toilet stalls, we see our bodies leaking and the boundary between our bodies' insides and their outsides becoming unclear. We see our inner bodies transgressing the boundaries of our skin. And we are reminded that our bodies are continually moving from a state of individuality toward undifferentiated form. Bataille equates this particular process of formlessness with both ecstasy and death. Bodily leakings are daily reminders that a hermetic and unchanging (thereby undying) body is a fiction. In an effort to turn away from this, users expect the space of public bathrooms to draw clear boundaries between our puddings and us. Where others might see our bodies returning to soil, we place partitions. Where we must see our liquid traces, they are quickly removed from view. Toward this end bathroom surfaces are designed to remove, completely and quickly, such evidence from our sight.

While pursuing such a reading, it is important to distinguish between physical and psychological cleanliness. As Mary Douglas describes in *Purity and Danger* (2002, 36), the concept of dirt has to do with matter being out of place. When our insides become our outsides through our waste products, they become perceived as filthy. But not until the Victorian era was human waste associated with disease. This is not to say that waste and disease are unrelated but rather to point out that the "sickness" inspired in us is at least partially psychological. For example, bathrooms that are white allow users to see the dirt that might cause disease. The same color allows us to see a pubic hair in the sink, which is a reminder of our body's entropy and sex. In order for it potentially to harm us physically, we would have to come in contact with it, yet simply seeing it makes us feel "sick."

Another type of formlessness that bathrooms are designed to prevent is sexual or subject-to-subject formlessness. When two bodies mingle, fluids exchange and the boundaries between them become unclear. During orgasm it is difficult to tell where one body ends and the other begins. Bataille (1986, 170) used the term *petite mort*, "little death," to make a connection between sex and death. As he discusses, when human bodies unite, a loss of boundaries occurs similar to when cadavers turn to dirt and mingle.

Sexual formlessness is not only the literal mixing of bodies; it is also the mixing of gender roles. Contemporary bathrooms are designed to be stages on which reductive gender roles are played out and reinforced. By going into separate rooms, we are choosing which role we will play in the performance



of gender. A cross-dresser reveals the element of choice and performance when he or she makes the decision to enter either the ladies' or the gents'. The objections raised when people choose the "wrong" door/identity reveal the widespread desire for a stable correlation between the gender and sex.

Sexual difference exists, as Elizabeth Grosz observes in *Volatile Bodies*. By understanding our bodies as dissimilar yet treating them as equal, the resulting exploration of unlike but nonetheless positive experiences can constitute a contemporary model of feminism. Public bathrooms, as conventionally constructed today, are based on a Freudian model, where women's bodies are men's bodies that lack a penis. Conventional women's rooms are basically men's rooms without urinals. The absence of female urinals in public spaces emphasizes women's lack of a penis and all the potency that Freud associated with penises. Grosz's model of contemporary feminism suggests urinals in both bathrooms, which would allow both men and women to reflect on what it means to have bodies and, specifically, genitals that leak. Here the use of urinals would prompt users to reflect on lateral rather than hierarchical differences between the sexes. *How* bodies leak would be the focus of thought, instead of *if* bodies leak.

When male or female bathrooms are entered, we encounter separate stalls. In relation to the policing of sexual identity, these divisions keep bodies both discrete and discreet from others of the same sex and in line with sanctioned heterosexual behavior. The only moment in either men's or women's rooms where congregation is encouraged is when we make ourselves "clean" at the sinks. This cleansing is psychological as well as physical, to the extent that we are performing acts of cleansing for our neighbors, announcing ourselves as free of bodily and sexual formlessness.

As Julia Kristeva discusses in *The Powers of Horror* (1982, 69), things that confound our constructs of order, our sense of the way the world should be—things that are ambiguous—are moved outside that invented system of order. Abjection, as she defines it, is the process of removing what does not make sense—what contradicts the agreed-upon order, what has become repulsive—to where it cannot be seen. Contemporary bathrooms are those places where the evidence of formlessness, in both messy materiality and slippery sexuality, is kept out of sight. Kristeva also points out that things kept in the margins are there not only because they confound categorization but also because they are potent. For these reasons, the periphery contains fertile ground for an exploration of our identities.

### *Projects*

At the intersection of art and architecture, my practice has been informed at times by a desire to tap the psychological potency of bathrooms. The stakes of engaging these public partitioned places, either in theory or practice, are to change the relationships for occupants with both their own bodies and those bodies around them. The projects of mine that follow are



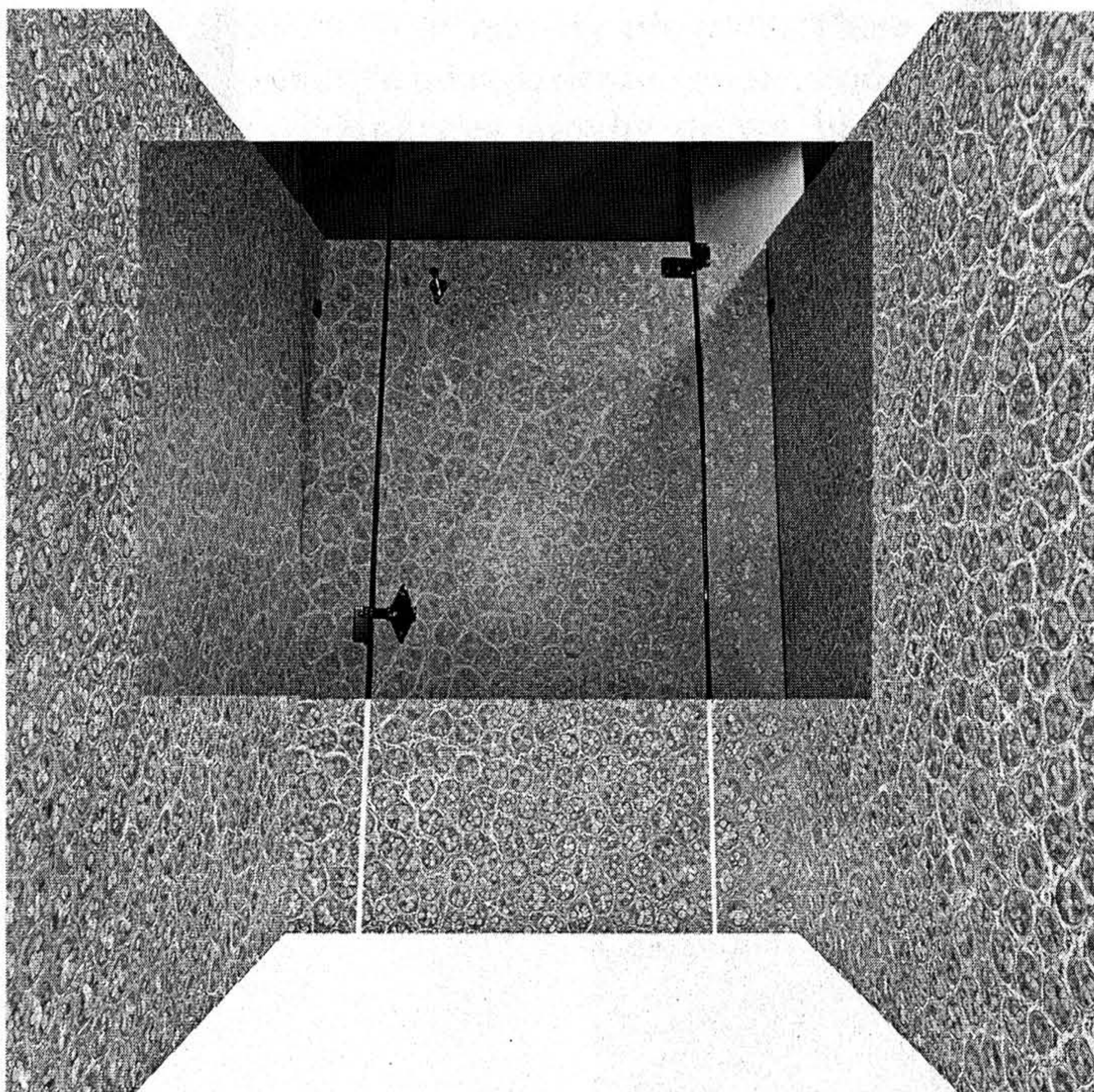


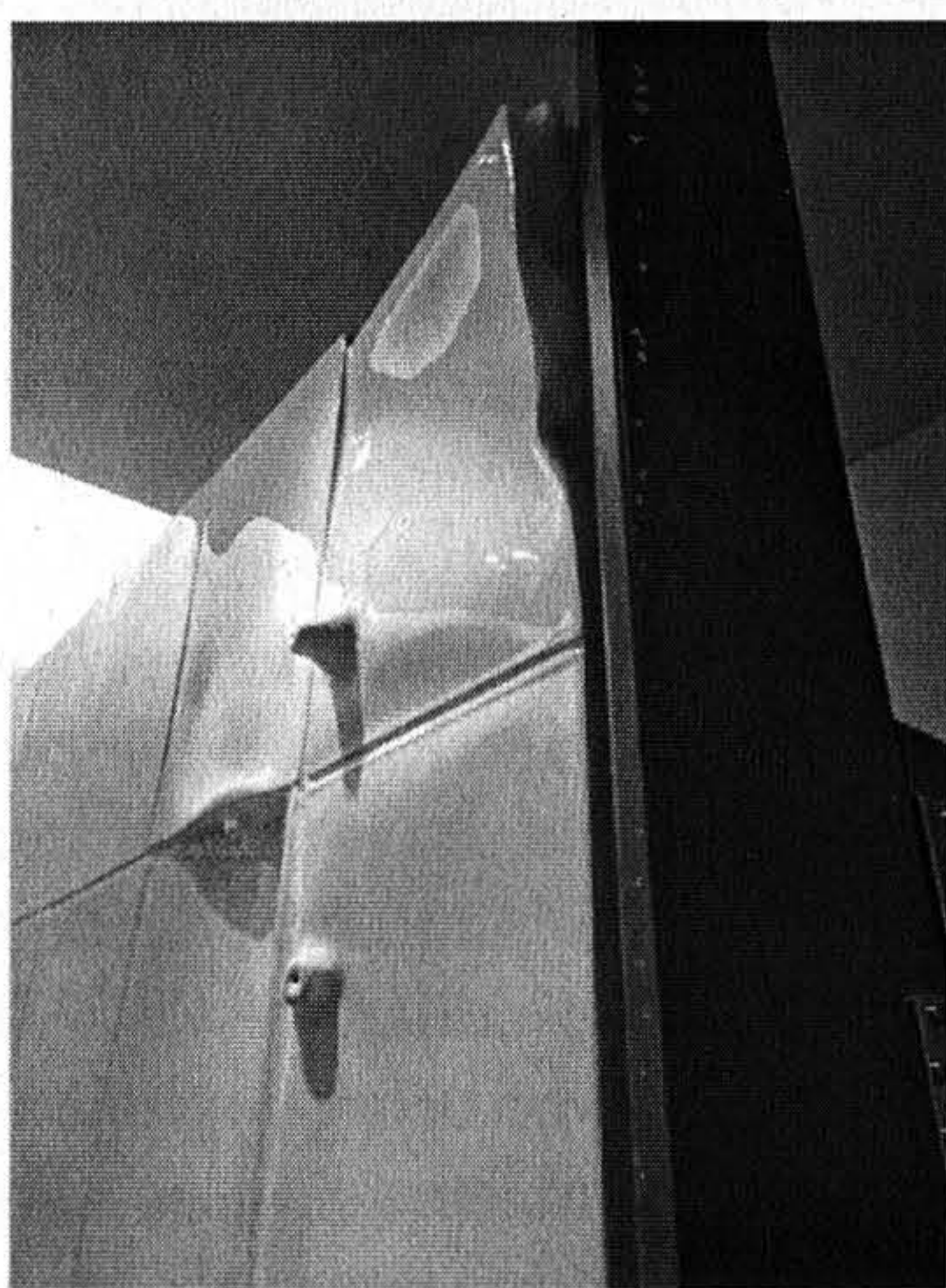
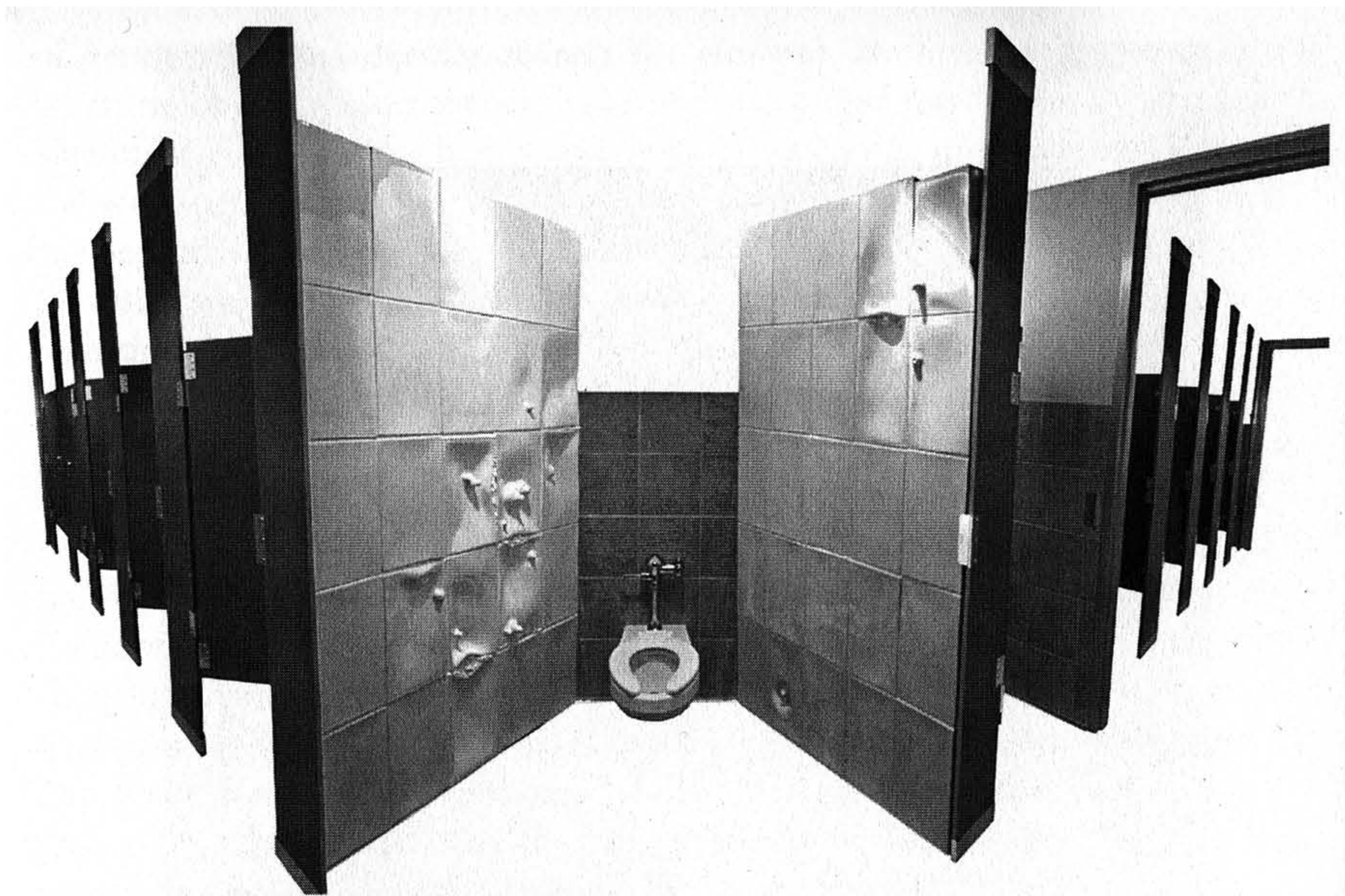
Figure 12.1 *Liquid Ghosts*, Museum of Sex, New York, 2002.  
(Photo: Alex Schweder.)

not intended to illustrate the theory I have outlined, nor vice versa. Rather, my aim is to provide experiential and textual perspectives on the related issues of formlessness, sexual difference, and abjection.

*Liquid Ghosts* (plastic laminate, 60" × 30" × 60", 2002) and *Lovelorn Walls* (edition of three, vitreous china and silicone sealant, 84" × 36" × 57", 2004) both alter bathroom partitions as a way of being explicit about the permeability of occupied space and occupying subjects. *Liquid Ghosts*, a permanent installation at New York's Museum of Sex, situates an occupant within an immersive image of the cell structure of a human colon, incorporated into the plastic laminate of partitions between toilet stalls. The installation is not explicit about what the imagery depicts. Instead, it allows the reading of the imagery to remain ambiguous, something bodily versus something architectural, something repulsive (the cells of a human colon) versus something covetable (a floral pattern). Here boundaries are confused when the inside of a human body is used to decorate the outside, the occupied space.

Working conversely, from the outside in, is *Lovelorn Walls*, a permanent installation at the Tacoma Convention and Trade Center made during an Arts/Industry residency at the Kohler plumbing fixture factory in Wis-





**Figure 12.2** (*above*) *Lovelorn Walls*, overview, Tacoma Convention and Trade Center, 2004. (Photo: Alex Schweder.)

**Figure 12.3** *Lovelorn Walls*, detail, Tacoma Convention and Trade Center, 2004. (Photo: Alex Schweder.)

consin. This work replaces the plastic partitions with the vitreous china used to make toilets, tiles, and tableware, to offer occupants of these stalls (one in the men's room and one in the women's) a way of thinking about ingesting the space around them. Some of the normal grid of tile blocks becomes bodily by sprouting spigots that imply the possibility of sucking something out of them. These blocks also allude to edibility through the application of small portions of the caulk with a serrated cake decorator.

*Peescapes* (vitreous china, 60" × 48" × 28", 2001) and *Bi-Bardon* (vitreous china, 32" × 34" × 14", 2001) were both made during an ear-



lier residency at Kohler's Arts/Industry program. These fully functional works complicate normative boundaries of gender, bodies, and buildings. Each urinal removes boundaries usually drawn between bodies. *Peescapes* is a series of male and female diptych urinals that place men and women in the same spaces as they urinate. *Bi-Bardon* removes the boundary of having two discrete urinals between occupants of already homosexual space.

*Peescapes* slows down the process of bodies becoming buildings in order to achieve an aesthetic rather than an economic experience. Urine is choreographed by biologically referenced interventions in the urinals that give the fluid shape as it returns to the landscape. *Bi-Bardon* grafts the imagery of an anomalous body onto a white and symmetrical plumbing fixture, crossing the line between building and biology.



**Figure 12.4 (above)**  
*Peescapes*, overview,  
2001. (Photo: Alex Schweder.)

**Figure 12.5** *Peescapes*,  
female quahog detail,  
2001. (Photo: Alex Schweder.)



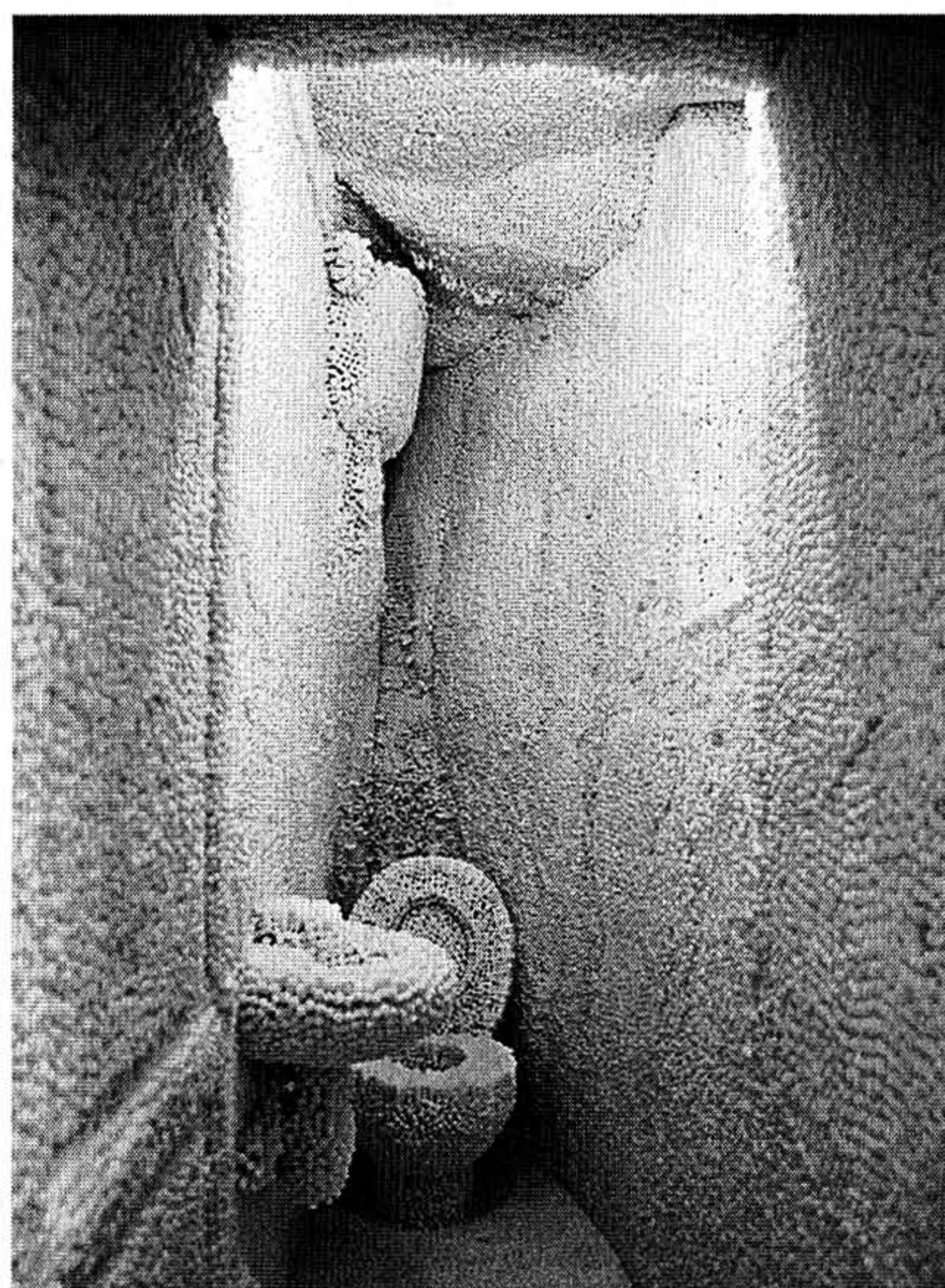
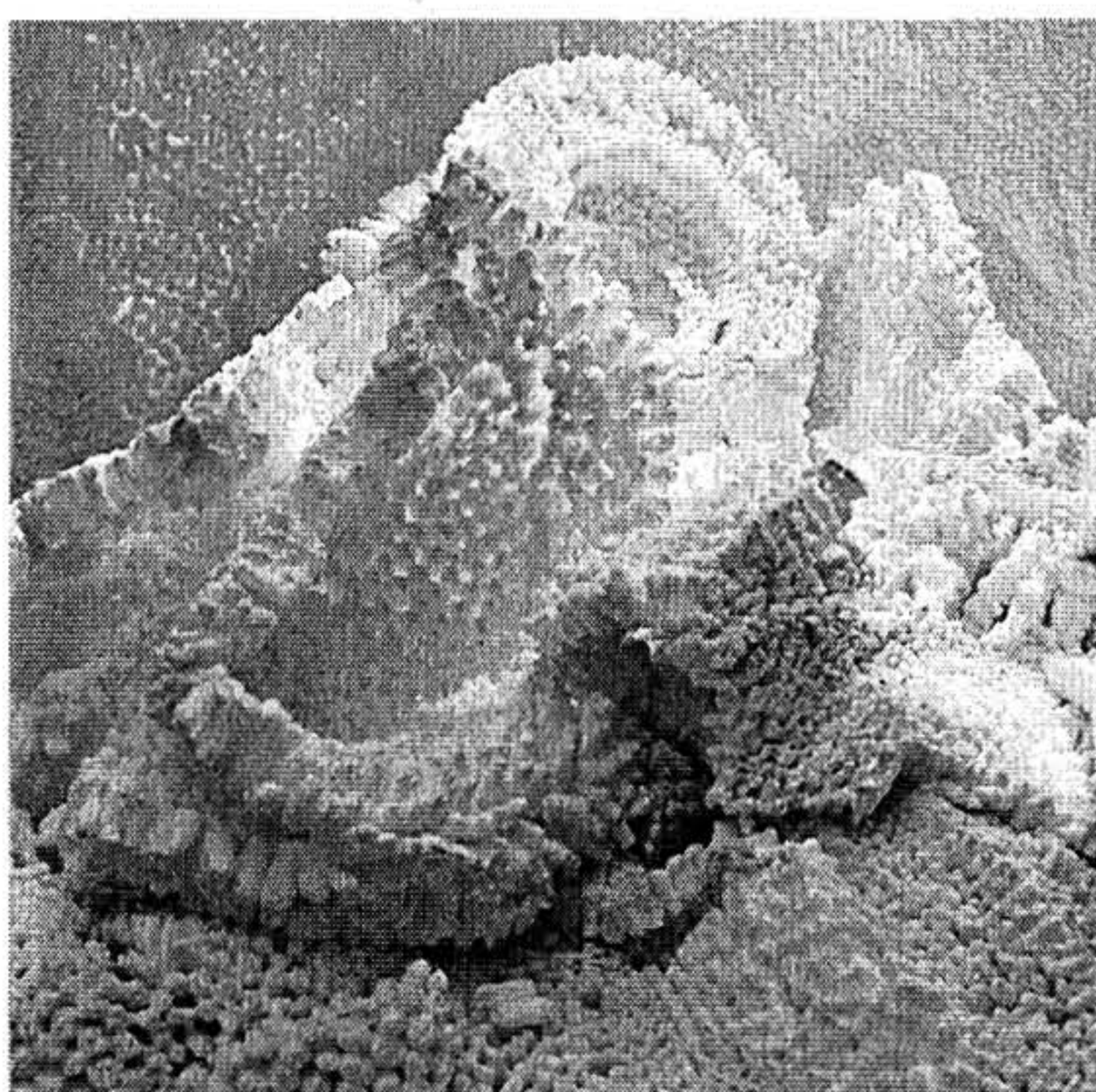




**Figure 12.6** *Bi-Bardon*, overview, 2001.  
(Photo: Alex Schweder.)

**Figure 12.7** (*below left*) *Spit Skin*, detail, 2006. (Photo: Richard Barnes.)

**Figure 12.8** *Spit Skin*, overview, 2006.  
(Photo: Alex Schweder.)



*Spit Skin* (2006) explores the permeability of occupied space and occupying bodies by making a moisture-sensitive skin with saliva and biodegradable loose-fill packing (peanuts) in a leaking bathroom. As wetness acts on this skin through either the body or the building, a new topography of this exchange emerges. Locations of liquids deform the once perfect skin through holes and bulges. This bathroom mirrors the inevitable changes in its occupants' bodies.

## References

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