

Pleasure Domes Decree

By **Paul Hughes**
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Ever since I watched the Woody Allen sci-fi film *Sleeper* with its silly "orgasmatron", I thought of how I might create space's that ignite the senses and inspire the spirit. However, in my conception, rather than a mere base for sexual experience, a genuine *Pleasure Dome* would be a highly interactive ambient space for a sensory experience of the most sublime, beautiful, even spiritual. It could be anything really - a separate stationary structure, or mobile and pneumatic one that could be taken anywhere, or become an integral

part of architecture itself. You could build something like this in your backyard or add it to your existing habitat. There are endless ways this idea could be implemented.

The idea is to stimulate your senses in all the right ways towards expanding consciousness.. I never seriously worked on this problem until about 1991, when I came up with a few possible designs, including a highly compact mobile one you could set up in an hour. For a visionary peak into my thinking back then see [Intimate Psibernetics](#)

There are literally hundreds of things you could integrate into this dome to make it into a full-fledged soma-psyche-spiritual space. Now with the Internet and rapidly accelerating computational power the possibilities become even more pronounced. Eventually symbiosis between human and machine, along with sophisticated neurological enhancements could usher in the world of [The Hedonistic Imperative](#).

When I first starting taking this idea seriously, there wasn't much to go with. At the time, brain machines were all the rage. Interestingly not much came of those, and I'm not sure why. In doing my original research there was an unconfirmed rumor, that sometime in the early 1960's, General Electric designed and built a *sonic shower*. As part of a product test run they installed about a hundred of theses in a suburban Chicago neighborhood. They were allegedly pulled from the market less than 6 months later, because apparently many of adult women who used it were having spontaneous orgasms. I suppose back then the mere idea of such a possibility was so outrageous, that GE quickly and quietly buried the technology for fear of scandal. I've tried googling this rumor to see if someone has finally spilled the beans on it. No luck so far.



In 1990, here is what I had come up with. A 10ft high, 20ft diameter dome, so that it could hold several people. Inside are 4 extremely luxurious and comfortable [Flogistron](#) chairs (pictured at right) providing the appropriate "zero g" effect. In the middle is a computer-controlled series of LCD projectors (Fujitsu made some for around \$800 at the time), which would display customized special effects (like you see at Raves) onto the dome surface. There would be motion sensors, like those found at the Exploratorium, and at this years Burning Man which would customize the display based on movements of participants. There would be surround sound of course. The sound and lights could then be mixed up using semi-synch software to induce different brain frequencies in the user (the classic light and sound machines). The speakers would set up various bi-neural beats to entrain the occupants into specific alpha, beta and theta wave states. The flogistrons would be customized to include all the massage settings you find in massage chairs you find at places like sharper image. Additionally, these machines would be synched in with the light/sound to add to the experience. The dome itself will be a large [Orgone Accumulator](#) pioneered by Wilhelm Reich. I have no idea if they actually work as claimed, but if they do, then they would potentially increase the orgone for the people inside, assisting in getting occupants into orgasmic states. Finally this pleasure dome would have a variety of odorizers and ionizers to keep the air clean while waffing people over with pleasant smells. In other words, this pleasure dome would be a sensorium.

For a more intimate and private space, [Roger Dean](#) came up with what he called a *retreat pod*. The design is amazing and organic but I can't find a picture of it on the net.

Part of my original idea was to make this set-up easily transportable and take it around the country to various venues and charging people for 10-30 minutes excursions. A very cool book called [Arthropods](#) by Jim Burn came out in 1971, which described many types of very interactive and fun pneumatic ad-hoc architectures. I even came up with some company names like 'Intimate Psibernetics' and 'Inergetics Inc'. I have to admit much of the inspiration for this came from Robert Anton Wilson's H.E.A.D - Hedonic Engineering and Development concept.

A lot has happened since 1990. The question now becomes what could we build today in the way of a pleasure dome? I've seen many variations to this basic theme pop up at Burning Man. For example in my camp Prometheatrics they came up with a self-enclosed suspended cube. Inside are mirrors on every surface. It's designed in such a way that rather than get the blocked effect you get with two mirrors, you have a nearly endless iterated tessellation of your own reflection going off in several directions at once. Add a few light gizmos and it adds to the effect. On the other side of the Esplanade we also came across another variation of this mirrored box theme. This one was not suspended, but it was very big, and could fit between 3-5 people at a time. There were more mirrors and sides, so it was also a lot of fun. I recently found a company names [Neuropop](#) that produces some cutting edge spaces.

It's only a matter of time before someone figures out how to expand intimate psibernetics to include the entire sensorium of body, sights, sounds and smells.

A few weeks ago I discovered this [wonderful blog](#) that aims to explore the cutting edge of interactive art and networked performance. Here are some of the goodies I found there:



[txOom](#) is a responsive PlaySpace, where the participants are invited to actively take part in transforming the environment; shaping the sound, playing with visuals, tangling in textiles, and thereby influencing the audio and visual environment around them by the way they move and interact with the space. The txOom environments "adopt" the properties of living skins. Fabrics, garments and objects in these spaces are shapeable interfaces.

The PlaySpace is composed of several wearable architectural elements including wall-shirts, swing-dresses and floor-skirts. By wearing these garments, the participants literally wear the txOom space, causing the

physical environment to be reshaped by their activity in it. This activity influences the shape of the physical environment as a whole, simultaneously inciting growth and mutation in the media worlds. Each player is sensed by the PlaySpace using motion sensors and vision tracking systems incorporated into the space. Gradually, the social interaction between the participants, and the responsive sound and visuals projected throughout the PlaySpace, will change and evolve as they begin to play together.



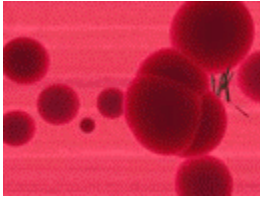
My favorite pleasure pathway is touch. Here is a kinesthetic implementation:

[Dry Translator](#), a sculptural installation piece by Sabrina Raaf, is built in response to new trends in 'smart architecture.' Smart technology is being created for enhanced human interaction and control of one's urban building and home environments. Interestingly what excites many is not the necessarily the enhancement of control, but really more the idea of intelligent responsiveness and heightened personal connection with the rooms they inhabit.

Dry Translator is taking this idea of responsiveness to an exaggerated degree. The idea is to create an environment so sensitive to human presence that a touch to its walls sends resonant vibrations throughout the bodies of its occupants. Whereas normally people acknowledge the presence of walls in a building as merely types of boundaries or surfaces, this piece allows them to engage with walls in newly intimate ways such as touching, beating, and even 'playing' the walls as instruments. And, it also allows them to use the walls as sorts of touch messaging devices.

The piece includes two custom designed audio vests (which gallery visitors are invited to put on) and an interactive wall. Essentially what occurs with this piece is that when a participant touches the wall in the gallery, they hear the sound of their touch not locally where their fingers hit the wall, but actually on their own torso (via the vest). Inside of the wall there

are several wired tentacles that act like stethoscopes which are able to pick up the slightest vibrations within the drywall material. Sounds from participants touching the wall are greatly amplified and transmitted wirelessly to the vests. The wall becomes a skin-like extension of the participant's own body. In touching the wall, they touch their self. Participants may also record a series of touches or gestures on the wall via an interactive console and thereby leave a message for the next participant to play back on the vest.

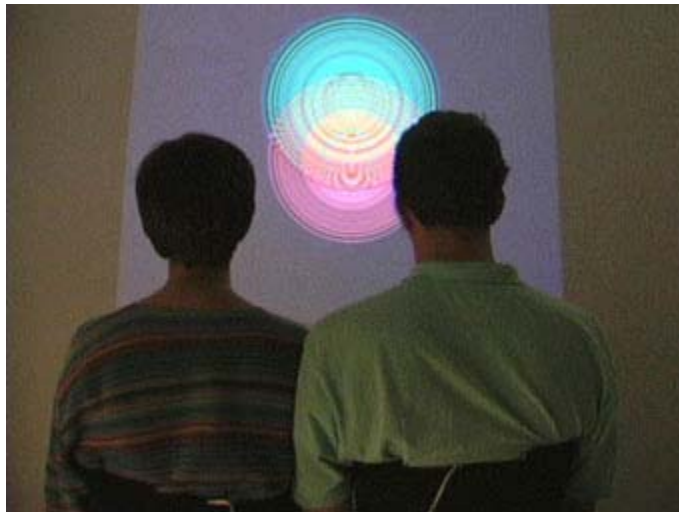


3D tools for performance artists

Touch Tools by Derivative, Inc. is a software toolkit that allows performance artists, VJs, architects, musicians, stage designers, and others to create 3D visuals in real time.

Using Academy Award-winning technology as its' basis, Touch is infinitely customizable. Creating your work in Touch is accomplished with visual, node-based editing, and Touch Designer has capabilities to create procedural 3D models, particles, compositing, textures, and live video input. Touch tools have already been used in high-profile projects, such as the visuals and other controls for **Plastikman** shows and as part of the new **Prada building** in Tokyo. (Definitely check the gallery and videos of Prada - very cool!)

The author of **Networked Performance** used Touch Designer to create **Immaterial**, a performance of live 3D elements with pre-recorded video.

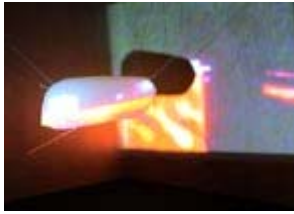


A co-operative experience

Pas de Deux by Mary Lucking is a performative installation for two people. The participants wear biofeedback devices and must co-operate by regulating their breathing to create patterns and align projected circles on the gallery wall.

When we think of performance, we tend to think of disciplines that are directly related - theatre, dance, etc. Pas de Deux reminds us that even very fundamental actions, such as breathing, can be measured in a performative

sense, and that in many ways, we are all performers.



Receptor-sculpture - transmitting and transmuting

[Tentacle](#) (2004) from Swedish arts collaborative [Beeoff](#) (Olle Hüge, Tomas Linell and Mikael Scherdin), is a receptor-sculpture on a network that feeds streamed content ("streaming media") over the Internet to several stations. Tentacle gathers and transmits sound and images from nodes at distributed locations, transmitting them to a central editing computer, creating new content which is rebroadcast simultaneously back to the translucent, sculptural nodes at each location. Tentacle has been exhibited abroad in Paris (Villette Numérique), Stockholm (Splintermind - the artists' studios) and Helsinki (Kiasma Museum), and will be exhibited for the first time in the United States at [Eyebeam](#) for their Artist in residence program.



Neural Net Sea Creature

[Mimetic's Mimetic Starfish](#) projects the image of a starfish onto a table, its tentacles extending to viewers' hands, if they move too quickly the tentacle suddenly retracts in a fluid but alarming manner.

Stroking a tentacle causes neural net activity to be displayed by muscular contractions and color changes of the skin. The Starfish through illusion and mimicry fools us into thinking that it is aware of our presence. Its movements are organic and convey a sense of aliveness. It is an example of Artificial Life that encapsulates ideas of magic and technology, art and science, philosophy and cognition.

For ideas about where these types of things can eventually lead read my article [Reality 3.0: Hypermediation and Paradise Engineering](#).

For a great visual/fictional exploration of these ideas check out Patrick Farley's comic - [Delta Thrives](#).

Other inspirations came from [Arthropods](#), and Roger Dean's [Retreat Pods](#).

I'd like to conclude with this beautiful and inspiring poem by Samuel Taylor Coleridge...

KUBLA KHAN
or, A Vision In A Dream A Fragment



In Xanadu did Kubla Khan

*A stately pleasure-dome decree :
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.
So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round :
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree ;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.
But oh ! that deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover !
A savage place ! as holy and enchanted
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover !
And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,
A mighty fountain momently was forced :
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail :
And 'mid these dancing rocks at once and ever
It flung up momently the sacred river.
Five miles meandering with a mazy motion
Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,
Then reached the caverns measureless to man,
And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean :
And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far
Ancestral voices prophesying war !
The shadow of the dome of pleasure
Floated midway on the waves ;*