

Session 1

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Embodied Labor: How the Seated Slump and Embodiment Shape Emotions in the Architecture of Work

The seated slump, characterized by its hunched shoulders and compressed form, has emerged as the defining posture of 21st-century work, encapsulating the physical and emotional toll of contemporary labor. This presentation examines the rise of the seated haunch as both an icon and consequence of modern work culture, interrogating its physiological and psychological implications. While this posture is often dismissed as a source of musculoskeletal dysfunction, its impact extends far deeper, influencing emotional states and neurophysiological processes that underpin mental health.

Positioned at the intersection of embodiment theory, neurophysiology, and the politics of work, this talk explores how posture operates as both a symptom and a driver of emotional states. Drawing on Antonio Damasio's somatic marker hypothesis and Lisa Feldman Barrett's work on emotion construction, it examines how the seated slump shapes the body's physiological processes, from the activation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis to shifts in autonomic regulation. These pathways, far from abstract, produce the tangible feelings of stress, disengagement, and unease that characterize much of the modern workplace.

Through the lens of architectural history and theory, this presentation interrogates the role of spatial and ergonomic design in perpetuating the seated slump. Galen Cranz's advocacy for body-conscious design underscores the potential for architecture to either reinforce or resist the embodied realities of labor. Yet, as enactive cognition suggests, the seated body is not merely a passive recipient of environmental forces but an active participant in the co-creation of emotional and cognitive states. The spaces of work, with their rigid seating arrangements and compressed configurations, inscribe emotional and political realities onto the body itself.

By situating the seated slump within the sociopolitical and architectural frameworks of labor, this presentation seeks to unravel its pervasive influence on emotional regulation and embodied cognition. It calls for a radical reconsideration of workplace design, advocating for spatial and ergonomic practices that align with the body's natural rhythms and support both physical and emotional well-being. In doing so, it invites us to question how architecture mediates the intersection of labor, embodiment, and the politics of emotion in the 21st century.