

HALO

*communication booth*¹

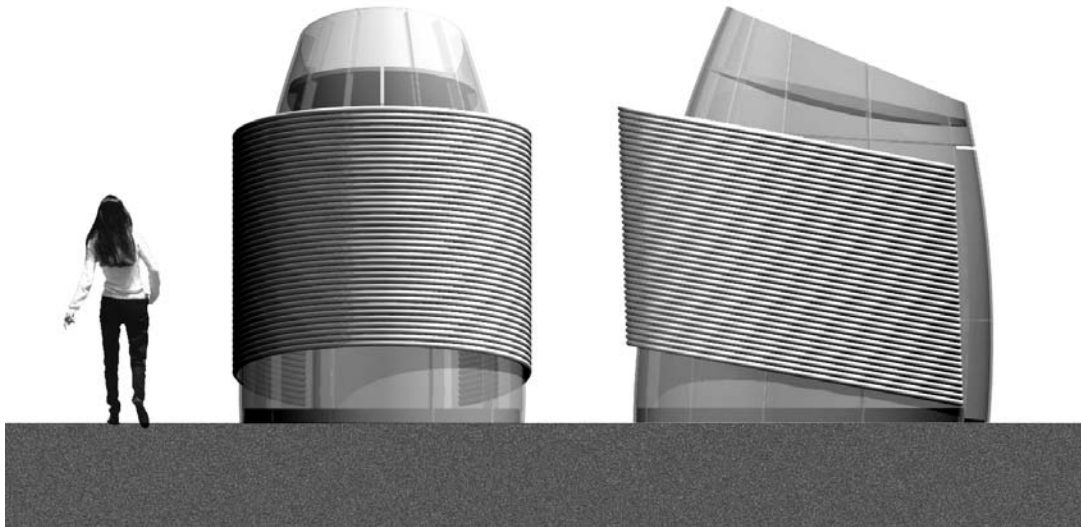
Lance Hosey

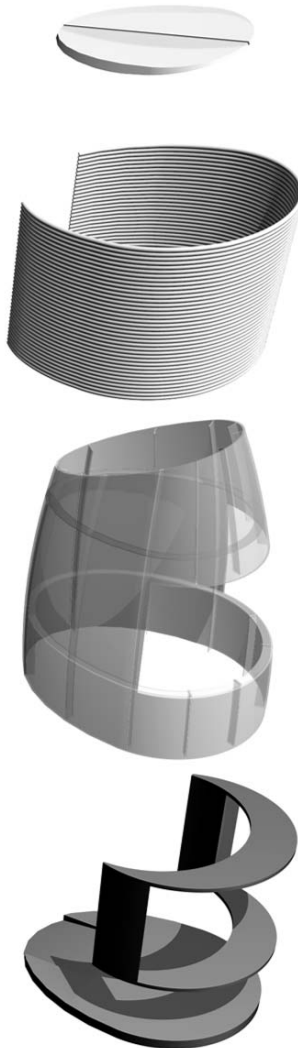
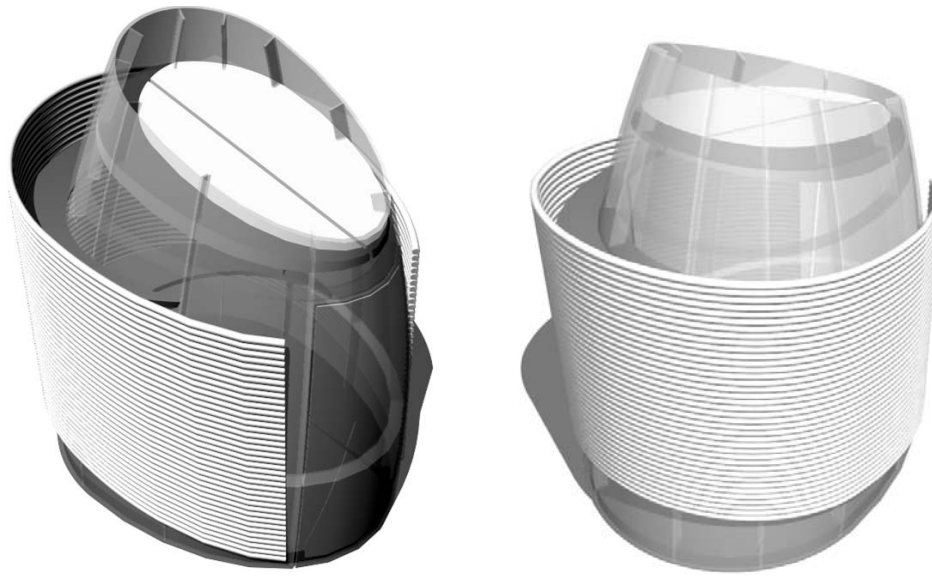
The concept of a “communication booth” is contradictory. Communication refers to social interaction, an exchange of information. A booth, however, is a small, enclosed compartment, usually accommodating only one person, used to separate the occupant from others. So, a “communication booth” implies both social and anti-social behavior, interacting with and yet removing oneself from the community. It is both open and closed.

The communication booth exhibited here addresses these oppositions—private and public, individual and collective, open and enclosed, transparent and opaque—by reexamining the legacy of the modernist glass box, which raises issues of material, technology, space and culture.

Early twentieth-century modernists saw glass as a material of social liberation. Paul Scheerbart’s manifesto, *Glasarchitektur* (1914), to which Bruno Taut paid homage with his famous pavilion from the same year, proposes glass to overcome the perceived repressions of existing material culture (represented by brick). The material was the emblem of a social revolution in which archaic privileges would be shattered: “glass destroys hatred.”² Transparency of material would symbolize a free and open community.

- 1 This project was developed as an entry to the Archinect “Communication Booth” competition, Fall 2001.
- 2 Paul Scheerbart, “Glass Architecture,” from Ulrich Conrads *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-Century Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT P, 1987), 32–33.
- 3 “[This house] belongs to no other men whatever as far as the earth may stretch. We shall not share it with others....” Ayn Rand, *Anthem* (New York: Signet, 1946), 85, 105.

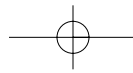




Ironically, the language of glass architecture came to represent not socialist dreams but capitalist ambition. What had been intended to battle old privileges came to champion new ones. By mid-century, Ayn Rand, staunch enemy of socialism, glorified the glass box in her book *Anthem* (1946) as the vessel par excellence of the heroic individual: "We have not built this box for the good of our brothers. We have built it for its own sake."³

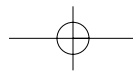
Transplanted to the west in the post-war era, the glass box had become a vision of wealth for both corporate America (Lever House, Seagram Building, etc.) and private houses. Exemplified by Philip Johnson's own house and Mies Van der Rohe's Farnsworth House, the glass house represents not the public's open view into private space, but rather the owner's privileged view of the public and of nature. The traditional framed views effected by windows as punched openings are exploded when the window becomes virtually the entire envelope. The gaze outward, unobstructed and continuous, ultimately fulfills man's mastery of all he surveys. The modernist experiment did not break down old patriarchal barriers; it reinforced them to a degree never before imagined.

The HALO reinterprets these themes. Located on urban sidewalks and plazas, in airport lobbies, shopping malls or other common space, it provides a single workstation and Web access for universal use, like a telephone-booth-cum-office. The classic phone booth may be understood as a small glass house, a modernist glass box in miniature. As such, it is marked by uncertainty, housing private functions in a transparent container located in public space. Visually, its privacy is a farce: like Clark Kent's glass spectacles, meant to conceal his identity, the glass booth supposedly conceals Superman's body.



Modernists hailed glass as the material for a new era, and today glass remains the material of our age but in a different use. Plate glass, the image of the Machine Age, has been replaced by glass fiber as the implement of the Digital Age. Strands of spun glass create optical filaments that carry electronic data on pulses of light. Glass is electronic plumbing.

In the HALO, a molded fiberglass shell is wrapped in glass tubes filled with optical fibers. Each booth acts as a switching station in which Internet activity from the surrounding neighborhood may be routed. The HALO pulsates with light as the community talks to itself: its glow signals social activity. The jewel-like form and image echo modernists' earliest visions of prismatic glass.





According to Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky, the concept of transparency in modernism ran contrary to conventional understandings of the term by creating not clarity but ambiguity. Literal transparency is a quality of substance: with glass, the eye oscillates between the material itself, the reflected image and the view beyond. Phenomenal transparency is a quality of organization: if two overlapping figures each claim for itself the common overlapped part, an equivocation of space results. Here transparency refers to “a simultaneous perception of different spatial locations.”⁴

The HALO is just such an equivocal space. A small portion of public space is given over to the individual for private use. The user is both in and out of the public sphere. The (literal) individual is wrapped in the (phenomenal) community. The private actions of the individual within the booth are enveloped in the public activity of the community at large. Views outward are obscured by the translucent, pulsing tubes: the potentially privileged view of the single occupant is obscured by the image of social discourse in action.

⁴ Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky, “Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal,” from Colin Rowe, *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa and Other Essays* (Cambridge: MIT, 1984), 159–183. The quotation is from Gyorgy Kepes, *Language of Vision*, cited in Rowe and Slutzky, 160–1.