

Re-Valuing Profile / For When Shape Falls Flat

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MUCH ATTENTION OF LATE HAS DRIVEN THE RETINAL READING OF A BUILDING'S OVERALL SILHOUETTE FROM A SPECIFIC VANTAGE AS A MEANS OF EMBEDDING OVERALL COMMUNICATIVE IDENTITY THROUGH ARCHITECTURAL FORM. RECENT DISCOURSE SURROUNDING THE PROJECT OF "SHAPE" SPECIFICALLY BUILDS ON THE 1972 DILEMMA RAISED IN THE CANONICAL TEXT OF *LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS*, IN WHICH ROBERT VENTURI AND DENISE SCOTT BROWN ESTABLISH TWO MEANS OF COMMUNICATION WITHIN ARCHITECTURAL FORM, DECORATION AND FIGURATION. WHILE THE FORMER PARADIGM ESTABLISHES COMMUNICATION THROUGH A PROCEDURE OF APPLIED ASSOCIATION TO GENERIC ARCHITECTURAL TYPES, THE LATTER COULD BE DESCRIBED AS A MANIPULATION OF THE BUILDING'S OVERALL WHOLE IN CREATING AN 'OBJECT TO BE READ.' SUCH A FORMAL OBJECT-READING RELIES ON RECOGNITION OF THE BUILT OBJECT IN TERMS OF A DISTINCT AND OFTEN FAMILIAR OUTLINE EMERGING FROM A GESTALT SILHOUETTE OF THE BUILDING'S GEOMETRY. SINCE 1972, THE FIGURATIVE HAS SPAWNED COUNTLESS SUB-PROJECTS IN ARCHITECTURAL FORMAL DISCUSSION CENTERED AROUND THE LEGIBILITY OF A BUILDING'S WHOLE, UTILIZING PROFILE AS THE CENTERPIECE FOR THE GENERATION OF COMMUNICATIVE CONTENT. THIS PAPER WILL EXPLORE ARCHITECTURE'S PAST, CONSIDERING THE POSSIBLE USE OF PROFILE AS A STRATEGY FOR COMMUNICATION AT THE SCALE OF THE ARCHITECTURAL PART IN LIEU OF THE WHOLE.

SHAPE AND PROFILE

The shape—or logo—building arises from consecutive procedures neutralizing the part in preference for the whole. As described by Robert Somol in what has become an instruction manual for shape objects, "Green Dots 101": "Turn a single part or component into the whole...Eliminate the articulation of scalar coding of an architectural device...Develop a precise but vague silhouette."² Noted for its economic language of construction — unarticulated by complexities of blob-form but rather a simple amalgamation of arcs and lines — shape implicates a proto-profile procedural alphabet. Broken down to its contour parts, shape gives rise to an alternative formalism of systematic, compound figuration, distinguished by translation of the syntactic, formal device of the contoured figure or profile.

Referenced by Venturi in his 1966 manifesto *Complexity and Contradiction*, the work of Italian architect Luigi Moretti

serves as a contemporaneous antecedent to the discourse surrounding figuration (Figure 1). In his writing, Moretti argues for formal and rhetorical value of the figure through the construct of the profile. Published in his coauthored journal *Spazio*, Morretti's 1951 essay "The Values of Profiles", is written as an early post-modern critique to prevailing tendencies exhibited in rationalism in northern Italy, wherein building's parts are deployed as simplified and discrete quotations of the past, or as Moretti describes "reduced to a stupid drawing of shapes, an empty repetition of forms."³ In his essay, Moretti implicates a new direction of architectural possibility in the manipulation of surface profile, establishing a precursor to a post-modern critique of reductive abstraction. Moretti identifies definitive characteristics or values of formal abstraction established by translation of cornice or moulding profiles, and the resulting figuration evident in traditional modalities of architectural form. For Moretti the profile is not merely a decorative device as dispelled by modernist or rational abstraction, nor a phenomenological device exclusive to manipulation of light in space, but rather a formal operation of compound syntactic function capable of performing through scalar mediation between the discrete parts of a building. In its history, the profile is definitive yet nuanced in various paradigms of western tradition — namely distinguished between Classical, Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque periods.⁴

PROFILE AS SIGNATURE

Moretti suggests the profile carries value in support of a building's holistic formal reading as an operative translation between part and whole, and as a rhetorical medium participating in a conversation with architecture's temporality. Articulated through operations of extrusion, revolution, and rotation, the disparate geometry of form are separated, conjugated, or confounded by the perceived contrast of light and shadow, arising from the rendered variations of a corrugated surface — the materialization of chiaroscuro per Moretti. Recalling the lineage and evolution of such characterization, Moretti identifies the profile curvature as part and figure as the whole, comprising the basis of a communicative syntax and progressive translation. This is perhaps most evident in the development of anthropomorphism associated with Renaissance humanism, whereby the facial profile is inscribed within cornice proportions illustrated by Vincenzo Scamozzi



Figure 1: Profile delineation of exterior balconies at San Maurizio Apartment block in Rome. Luigi Moretti, 1962. Image courtesy of John Paul Rysavy

and Jacques-François Blondel. For Scamozzi the profile served as a rhetorical, semantic device, its lines and curves structuring an individual, autographic expression of the architectural whole; its moulding describing the spatial, perceptual, and formal order of an architectural object.⁵ In reference to this Renaissance tradition, Moretti relates the curvature of profile, and its consequential shaping of holistic character as the identifiable signature of a building.

Categorically, Moretti identifies profiles of the first and second order, distinguishing the former as for instance a molding or cornice, giving rise to the overall reading of a building's interior volume and exterior form, whereas the latter describes or accentuates individual elements of capitals, pilasters, apertures, or thresholds. Through compound figuration, transposed by constituent curves, profiles of the first order regulate the holistic perception and reading of geometry through scalar translation. This holds true in the spatial articulation and interiority of the plan as outlined by the skeletal framework of cornices and moldings, as well as the building's external expression, whereby formal geometry and silhouette are punctuated by the acuity of profile composition.

As an illustration of this idea Moretti examines the radical translation of the classical temple pediment in Alberti's San Sebastiano at Mantua. By highlighting this example, Moretti

underscores the use of profile in the classical temple as a strategy emphasizing the volumetric parts of the building, as the roof or diagonal and the vertical, in which the geometry of the frontal elevation is bifurcated and distinguished by the severity of the molding profile. San Sebastiano presents an ambiguity, in that the face of the top and bottom, through deletion of the cornice at the center window, makes legible two simultaneous rhetorical traditions. Such a translation from a classical to renaissance temple establishes a rhetorical context of figural representation, where the reading of silhouette is broken down by the contrast of arcs and lines of the profile's curvature. In this context, it is noteworthy that the formal silhouette and figure of San Sebastiano is further augmented from its classical association as a notional temple in the holistic reading of Moretti's apartment block at Casa Il Girasole in Rome, and later by Venturi in domestic form at the Vanna Venturi House in Pennsylvania, wherein the central break or absence of moulding renders discrete parts ambiguous in relation to a gestalt reading of the whole as house.

PROFILOG CABIN

In further examining the profile's agency, our collaborative practice explored the problematic of part to whole through the development of a log cabin, responding to a prompt for a small pavilion in a northern climate. Distinguished by its silhouette, the log cabin serves as an archetypal case study whereby its image, or holistic figure — emblematic for instance of homesteading or frontier — is defined by the composition and assembly of its parts: a conventional stereotomic construction employing the cutting, notching and



Figure 2: Frontal elevation of the profilog cabin. Image courtesy of op.AL + And-Either-Or.

stacking of saw milled lumber of regular semicircular profile extrusions. Similar to a cornice or moulding, the tectonic assemblage of stacked timber is rendered solid, where the negative corrugation between each log distinguishes the cabin's reading (Figure 2). By exploring the formal, spatial, and material consequences of the log's profile, Profilog Cabin considers the perceived relationship between the cabin's typological silhouette and its associated recognition through translation and aggregation of the profilog.

As a construct, the geometry and representation of the profilog establish a multifaceted identity of various readings between shape and volume, material and surface. Translating the repeated radial curvature of a conventional log, the profilog augments the figure of saw milled timber and its axial composition. Compound curvature proportions according to the facial profile in the syntactic tradition of Scamozzi and Blondel (Figure 3). Each log is cast of light-weight fiber reinforced concrete recalling concrete's historic

role as a compressive material, in contrast to contemporary use in adorning the face of a building as a rainscreen panel or classical moulding. The profilog further engages the textual definition of profile's etymology, arising from the Italian roots *pro filo*, "to spin forth". Strung with burnt mohair as expressed on the exterior, the interior face is insulated by an inlay of mohair tapestry patterned in the dichromatic projection of frontal and side facial profiles across the corrugated surface of each extrusion, creating coincidental readings through profile curvature.

As with the stacked log in the assembly of a stereotomic wall, or a cornice in its striated definition of interiority, the profilog performs both tectonically and formally through the double function of log structure and moulding frame, characterizing exterior shape and interior volume. Employing three-dimensional translation of profile extrusion plus revolution and two-dimensional projection, localized readings of curvature are conflated and confounded through gestalt interpretation, interference, and double readings — a Janus, a totem, a kiss, and a vase (Figure 4). The result is a Klein bottle log cabin, characterized by the double-sided nature of the figural

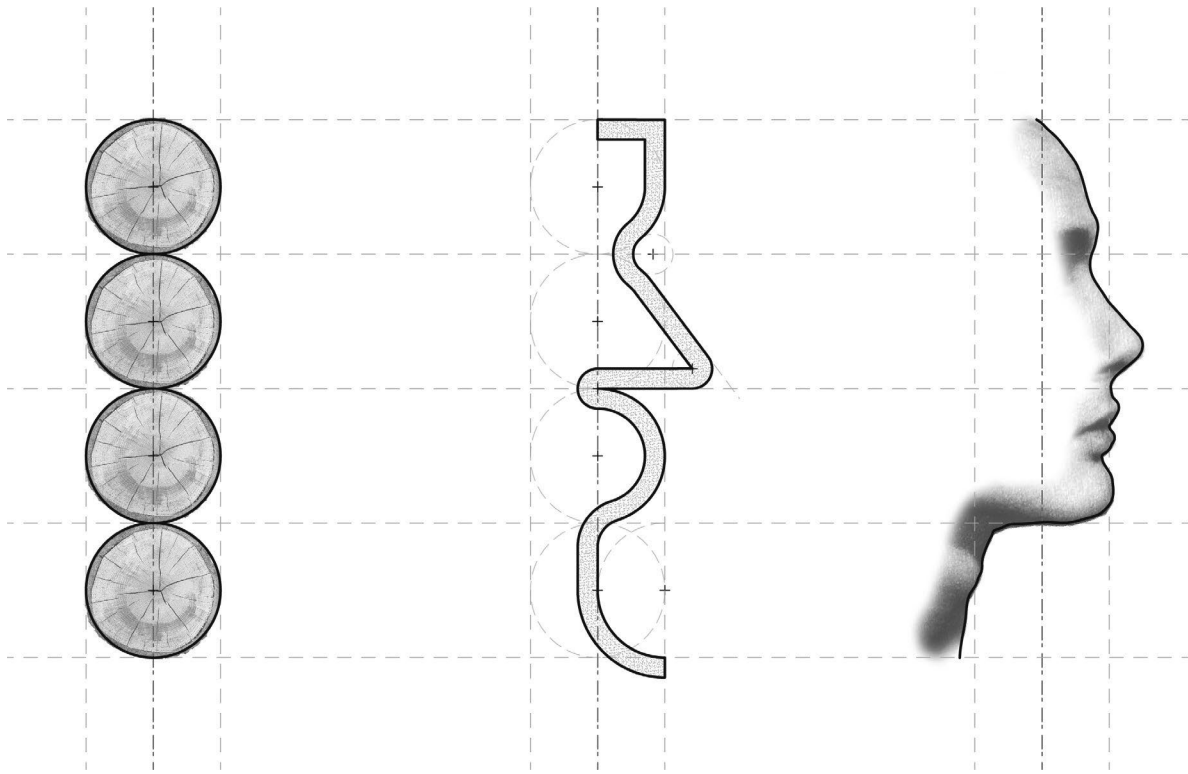


Figure 3: The Profilog; a tectonic profile of assembled logs transcribed by proportions of the human face. Image courtesy of op.AL + And-Either-Or



Figure 4: Exterior and interior of the profilog window translated by extrusion and revolution. Image courtesy of op.AL + And-Either-Or.

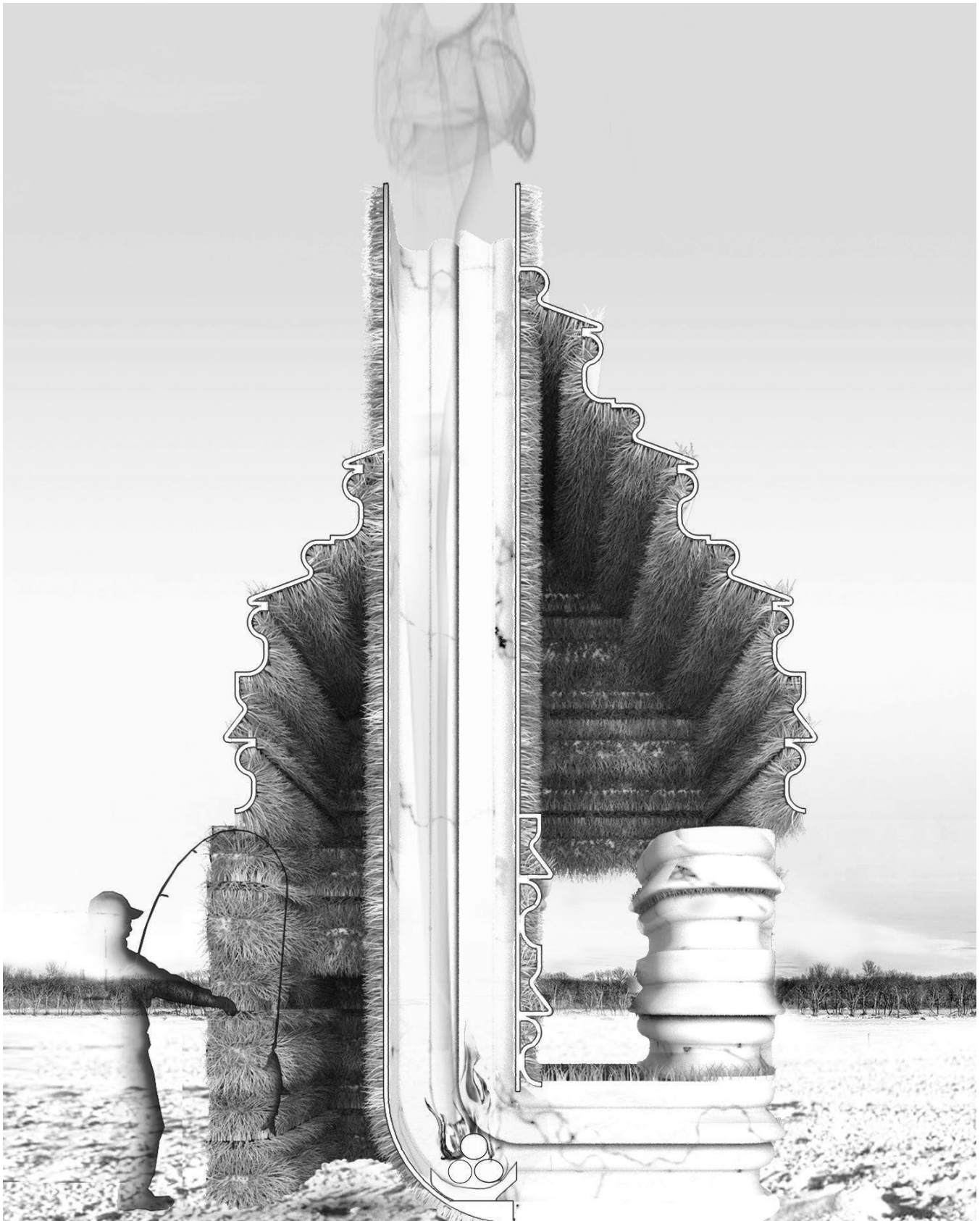


Figure 5: A two sided log cabin, formed by extrusion and revolution of a double sided profilog; Image courtesy of op.AL + And-Either-Or.

profile, collectively questioning the profile's capacity to augment and transform the perceptual reading of a recognizable whole, through volume, shape, surface, and material (Figure 5).

RECONFIGURATION

In the logo-building, a series of borrowed profiles are deployed through simple operations towards the creation of linguistic character, where representation through profile serves as a logo for an individual building rather than an icon of something else, similar to Moretti or Scamozzi's signature. As a point of embedded verbal syntax, the profile's structure is capable of linking discontinuous elements through figuration of detail rather than being bound singularly in overall gestalt. The profile, as described by compound curvature, provides a means of further interrogating formal concerns within current discourse. In a sense, a vocabulary of the curve as a generative tool is already familiar, as a basis of geometry for instance in NURBS based scripting and modeling — of lofts, sweeps, extrusions, etc. In its collectivity, the profile characterizes the spatial, perceptual surface and formal order of an architectural object. As described by Moretti, the profile is not merely a repetition of lines or line types, but a means of aggregation and consumption of formal surface affect observed in light and shadow.

Farshid Moussavi has suggested that architectural discourse is multivalent, where style arises as an interconnected reconfiguration and re-appropriation of a contemporaneous built form.⁶ It is through critical redeployment and variation of form based on a technique that style finds its agency; incrementally advancing cultural conversation — as with Alberti, Moretti, and Venturi, or in this case, the archetypal cabin and profilog cabin — the figural profile distinguishes the signature of a perceived totality. Reconsidering the profile as a grammatical construct of the part to whole allows for an extended discursive context within current modes of architectural production, projecting an expanded language in the contemporary field.

ENDNOTES

1. Venturi, Robert, Steven Izenour, and Denise Scott Brown. *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977.
2. Somol, Robert E. "Green Dots 101." In *Hunch 11: Rethinking Representation*, edited by Penelope Dean, 28-45. Rotterdam: Berlage Institute, 2007.
3. Moretti, Luigi, and Marco Mulazzani. "The Values of Profiles." 1951. In *Luigi Moretti: Works and Writings*, 19-39. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002.
4. *ibid.*
5. Scamozzi, Vincenzo. *L'Idea Del Architettura Universale*. Venice, 1615; See Blondel, Jacques François. *Cours D'Architecture*. Paris, 1771. See also Hill, Michael, and Peter Kohane. "The Signature of Architecture': Compositional Ideas in the Theory of Profiles." *Architectural Histories*, 3(1): 3, no. 18 (2015): 1-21. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/ah.cu>.
6. Moussavi, Farshid. *The Function of Style*. Edited by Marco Ciancarella, Jonathan A. Scelsa, Mary Crettier, and Kate Kilalea. New York: Actar D, 2015.