
LOST IN TRANSLATION: SEARCHING FOR THE DETAIL IN CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURAL PRACTICE

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"In a poetic universe, every fragment is a luminous detail. It resonates with the super-sensuous. It is in perpetual transport from the everydayness of its material appearance to the sphere of the transcendental where it is really located, and its impact upon consciousness constitutes a moment of vision or the sense of embracing the totality of all that is."¹

The architectural detail has a tendency to make many architects uncomfortable. It could be speculated that this is due to its complex, demanding, and at times elusive nature. The architectural detail requires constructive know-how, an eye for craft and joining, and sensitivity to understanding the intricate detailed relationships demanded of architectural practice. Conventional understanding of the detail typically treats it more as a technical problem to be solved around a specific constructive condition. Questions being asked of the detail are generally focused on where and how is the detail being used and what are the responsibilities being placed on it. While these are important questions that must be addressed within the development of the detail, when treated as technical problem solving the rich and dynamic play of the detail can become lost and disembodied from the work. Its potential as an active and necessary contributing part to a larger whole and realization of the architectural work can diminish or disappear completely.

Outspoken voices on the architectural detail such as Edward Ford, Marco Frascari, and Rem Koolhaas have firmly rooted positions and opinions on the detail. Koolhaas questions and challenges the traditional notion of the detail's constructive nature as a primary driver of architectural ideas while architectural theorist Marco Frascari asserts that the architectural detail is the source for "the possibilities of innovation and invention."² Author Edward Ford writes about the contradictory nature of the architectural detail in his most recent book *The Architectural Detail*: "The good detail is not consistent, but non-conforming; not typical, but exceptional; not doctrinaire, but heretical; not the continuation of an idea, but its termination, and beginning of another."³

What becomes apparent is that the architectural detail embodies a broad and diverse range of interpretations. With the challenges and pressures that architecture faces, understanding the nature of the architectural detail and its role in practice can provide insight for ways architects engage a changing architectural landscape.

THE ARCHITECTURAL DETAIL

The beginnings of the architectural detail can be found within the architect's imagination; cultivated through the unfolding dialogue of hand and mind working to reconcile architectural desires and dreams with physical and constructive realities. It is a position that the architect takes on the joining of materials and spaces that form works of architecture. For example, emphasis on the articulation of the joint might inform the decisions an architect is making regarding the expression of how materials are being brought together to reveal the forces, connections, and components within the building. Another type of articulation might strive to downplay, conceal or veil the joint with the intent of bringing forward other qualities such as volumetric, formal, and spatial continuity.

To realize a work of architecture means that the architect must know and understand how the materials and assemblies of the work are going to be joined and the consequences of those decisions constructively, formally and spatially. Marco Frascari writes, "The joint, that is, the detail, is the place of the meeting of the mental construing and of the actual construction."⁴ What he is advocating is that the architectural detail is fundamentally rooted in the choices and decisions the architect is making regarding "the union of construction."⁵ The architectural detail is not subordinate to the work; rather it initiates and establishes questions and propositions that surround the conditions and circumstances of joining at multiple scales of a project.

Atmospheres

Within both the conception and constructive realization of an architectural work there is always a guiding architectural vision of the space imagined. These visions are essential to the nature of architectural detail. They draw together both the qualitative and quantitative conditions formed by the choices of building materials, natural light, structure, spatial dimensions, textures, joining, etc.; evoking and forming atmospheric impressions. In a recent lecture, Juhani Pallasmaa described architectural atmospheres as:

"...an exchange between material or existent properties of the place and immaterial realm of human perception and imagination. Yet, they are not physical 'things' or facts, as they are human experiential 'creations.' Paradoxically, we grasp the atmosphere before we identify its details or understand it intellectually."⁶

What is curious about Pallasmaa's position on atmospheres is that he makes a distinct separation between the experience of a spatial condition and the recognition of the details that make it. He points out that the understanding and identification of the details is formed after the experience. While it is understandable that the specifics of the details might not be immediately perceived, it could be argued that the details are actively present. The 'grasped' atmospheric conditions and experiences Pallasmaa speaks about are the manifestation of the architectural detail at play; made evident through the detailing of joints, materials, assemblies, floors, walls, ceilings, and rooms that form architectural space. The space perceived and experienced is based on the multitude of carefully drawn out decisions made by the architect. These details are highly nuanced and dependent on the architect's 'eye for the detail' to properly orchestrate these detailed relationships. Subtle changes can impact and significantly alter these architectural moments. Special attention has to be given by the architect to the detailing to insure that the constructive realities of the work are in-line with the architectural vision. As Marco Frascari writes:

"The art of detailing is really the joining of materials, elements, components, and building parts in a functional and aesthetic manner. The complexity of this art of joining is such that a detail performing satisfactorily in one building may fail in another for very subtle reasons."⁷

Fragments

The architectural detail comprises a complex assemblage of detailed relationships, each with their own specific requirements and performative demands that in turn must find their proper place within the totality of the work. It is a nesting of details within details that occur simultaneously and at multiple scales addressing constructive, formal, and spatial questions of joining. The architect's work of trying to marry the details is often countered by forces trying to pull them apart. With the performative responsibilities the detail must address other demands such as budgets, programmatic needs, schedules, complex client / contractor relationships, and regulatory authorities test and challenge the details. The struggle for the architect is often not how to bring them together, but rather how to hold them together. It is a condition characterized by Robin Evans as unity and fragmentation.

"Unity and fragmentation are the two major contrasted modes of twentieth-century composition in architecture as well as painting. Classic dialectical pair, married and bickering, they are unable to carry on without each other."⁸

Fragmentation doesn't mean that the work lacks coherency, but rather that the details can maintain their own identity or autonomy while at the same time are able to actively participate in support of the whole. It is a dynamic play that tests and challenges the work where the struggle for resolution resides within the details. Edward Ford writes about this dialectical condition:

"The autonomous detail is the manifestation of one of these sensibilities in the context of another – the vital and the inert, the naturalistic

in the abstract. The expression of both sensibilities is an essential condition for a true architectural understanding. It is the role of a detail not to resolve this contradiction, but to articulate it."⁹

DETAILED POSITIONS

When considering the architectural detail in practice two voices emerge that represent diverse yet important positions taken on the detail: Rem Koolhaas and Louis Kahn.

Matters of Fact

An outspoken critic of the detail, Rem Koolhaas' perceived position often places him in the antagonistic role as villain who dismisses the details significance. In an interview, Koolhaas recounts his reaction to the criticism his early built work in Holland received regarding the details: "The critics say the detail of the projects is simply bad, and I say there is no detail. That is the quality of the building. No money, no detail, just pure concept."¹⁰

This often quoted passage on the 'expendability' of the detail is somewhat misleading when taken out of the context of the interview. It is only one part of his concern regarding the loss of detail. Koolhaas' critical assessment of the detail was directed at the state of architecture in Holland during the early 1990's and the pressures and demands placed on both architects and architecture. Budgets, schedules, complexity of building programs and client / developer relationships were driving the work at the expense of architecture. Koolhaas implies craft, composition, scale, and proportion were no longer viable architectural considerations under these external forces. Koolhaas was expressing the frustration he was experiencing, where the architect was being forced out and relegated to a role of mere service provider.

Further in the interview, Koolhaas takes an unexpected turn elaborating on the necessity of the detail:

"On the other hand, our building in Karlsruhe is obviously very dependent on detail; without a detailed exploration it could turn into a nightmare. It has to have a roughness and utility on the one hand, but on the other hand, areas of inexplicable refinement and mystery. So, in that sense, it is for me as important to create a kind of unconsciousness, some disturbance in the realization of any process, as to work very precisely on the definition of our building experience."¹¹

Framed in this way, Koolhaas' attitude towards the detail can be seen as a way of dispelling and shaking loose the traditional understanding of the architectural detail. His attention is redirected to the detail as a way of, "sensing the whole instead of a fixation on the joints and the encounters."¹² Detailing, as Koolhaas engages it is "a mode of freeing attention for other aspects such as the way the ground is read, the sensing of abstractions, of transparency and translucency, of concrete and of the conditions themselves."¹³ He seeks refuge in the details of concepts, the detailing of ideas, diagrams, images, and gestures; constructing a realm and range of exploration that distances his work from the immediate reach and pressures of external forces

that are outside of his control. What he is willing to concede are the constructive realities. Material and assemblies are taken as matter-of-facts meant to perform as needed, variables that can be negotiated. The constructive nature of the work is taken as a technical platform upon which concepts are woven and overlaid. The degree to which he engages and crafts the physical details is reliant more on how they relate to the conceptual nature of the work.

Prose and Kahn

Embedded within the words and built works of Louis Kahn are questions and propositions regarding the nature of the architectural detail. There is an order that structures his thought regarding the inherent relationship of material choices, natural light, buildings systems, and forms of construction with the making of architectural space (figure 1). Kahn's position is rooted in an intimate relationship that "make the elements live and work well with each other."¹⁴ While this may provoke in some critics a position of nostalgia or sentimentality, Kahn's words revisited have relevancy and a place in current architectural discourse regarding the detail. In speaking about Architecture, Kahn says:

"A great building, in my opinion, must begin with the unmeasurable, must go through measurable means when it is being designed, and in the end must be unmeasurable. The only way you can build, the only way you can get the building into being, is through the measurable. You must follow the laws of nature and use quantities of brick, methods of construction, and engineering. But in the end, when the building becomes part of living, it evokes unmeasurable qualities, and the spirit of its existence takes over."¹⁵

Kahn does not separate the ideas informing the work from the constructive realities that are essential and necessary. They go hand in hand. When he asks what a brick wants, he is trying to confront questions of materiality seeking to find and understand its limitations and potentials. He is dealing with the consequences of choices and their implications at multiple scales within the work. Materials, openings, natural light, rooms, and the street are brought together and held in such a way that to alter them changes the nature of the work. For Kahn the details were not variables or negotiable. This position often meant that obstacles and challenges that came up required that he had to step back and rethink the work and possibly reformulate the question and direction. For Kahn this was the nature of the architect's work. It took time, patience, and persistence; a difficult position to sustain given the demands of his architectural practice and a way of working that was often met with great resistance.

An example of this resistance can be found during the construction of the Kimbell Art Museum in Ft. Worth, Texas. Tensions within the working relationship of Kahn and Preston Geren, associate architect hired to assist Kahn's office with the construction documents and administration of the project, came to an impasse in the summer of 1970.

The difficulty arose over Kahn's way of working which could be described as deliberate and methodical. He was always seeking

to revise and improve the work no matter the stage of the project with "his obvious aspiration being that of finding, even in the last moment, some constructive detail or spatial solution which would allow a breakthrough in the design itself."¹⁶ With pending deadlines approaching, Geren felt that Kahn was too slow regarding design decisions and impeding the construction schedule. To fulfill his contractual obligation and keep the project moving, Geren asked to be given architectural control over the project. His request was almost granted had it not been for the director of the museum Richard Brown intervening on Kahn's behalf. As Marshall Meyers (Kahn's project architect for the Kimbell) recounts, "Only after some intense behind the scenes negotiations with the Kimbell family, who appreciated that the building might no longer be a 'Kahn' building,"¹⁷ was Kahn kept in control of the design.

PARTING THOUGHTS

In the book, *The Aesthetics of Architecture*, author Roger Scruton writes that:

"...detail may be the only thing which an architect can enforce. The ground plan and elevation of a building are usually affected (if not dictated) by factors beyond the architect's control – by shape of a site or the needs of a client – while details remain within his jurisdiction."¹⁸

What Scruton reveals is that within the practice of architecture the detail provides the architect a realm of inhabitation; a place to touch all aspects and conditions of the work. Details are the way through which works of architecture are realized; embodying the architect's imagination, knowledge, and sensitivity to material, space, and joining. They are profound, significant, yet fragile. The challenge for the architect is to not lose hold of the details while at the same time not grasping them so tightly that their potency is lost. Searching for the details requires an immersion into the work; a way of cultivating and crafting a practice that is vigilant of the detail.

As the question of the architectural detail is considered, it might be helpful to turn to the words of writer Annie Dillard:

"Push it. Examine all things intensely and relentlessly. Probe and search each object in a piece of art. Do not leave it, do not course over it, as if it were understood, but instead follow it down until you see it in the mystery of its own specificity and strength."¹⁹

ENDNOTES

- 1 Gerald Bruns, "Toward a Random Theory of Prose," in *Theory of Prose*, author Victor Shklovsky (Elmwood Park, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990), 7.
- 2 Marco Frascari, "The Tell-the-Tale Detail," in *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture: An Anthology of Architectural Theory, 1965-1995*, ed. Kate Nesbitt (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 501.
- 3 Edward Ford, *The Architectural Detail* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2011), 312.
- 4 Frascari. "The Tell-the-Tale Detail," 503.
- 5 Frascari. "The Tell-the-Tale Detail," 500.

- 6 Juhani Pallasmaa, "Space, Place, and Atmosphere" (Lecture, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Virginia, February 8, 2012).
- 7 Frascari. "The Tell-the-Tale Detail," 501.
- 8 Robin Evans, "In Front of Lines That Leave Nothing Behind," in *Architecture Theory since 1968*, ed. K. Michael Hays (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1998), 486.
- 9 Ford, *The Architectural Detail*, 284.
- 10 Alejandro Zaera Polo, "Finding Freedoms: Conversations with Rem Koolhaas," in *El Croquis 53* (1992), 10.
- 11 Polo, "Finding Freedoms: Conversations with Rem Koolhaas," 11.
- 12 Arie Graafland and Jasper de Haan, "A Conversation with Rem Koolhaas," in *The Critical Landscape*, ed. Michael Speaks (Rotterdam: The Authors / 010 Publishers, 1996), 226.
- 13 Graafland and de Haan, "A Conversation with Rem Koolhaas," in *The Critical Landscape*, ed. Michael Speaks, 226.
- 14 Louis Kahn, *What Will Be Has Already Been: The Words of Louis I. Kahn*, ed. Richard Saul Wurman (New York: AccessPress Ltd. and Rizzoli, 1986), 131.
- 15 Louis Kahn, "Architecture," in *Between Silence and Light: Spirit in the Architecture of Louis I. Kahn*, ed. John Lobell (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1979), 48.
- 16 Luca Bellinelli, "Preface," in *Louis I. Kahn: The Construction of the Kimbell Art Museum*, ed. Luca Bellinelli (Milan, Italy: Skira editore, 1999), 7.
- 17 Marshall D. Meyers, "Making the Kimbell: A Brief Memoir," in *Louis I. Kahn: The Construction of the Kimbell Art Museum*, ed. Luca Bellinelli (Milan, Italy: Skira editore, 1999), 21-22.
- 18 Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Architecture* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), 211.
- 19 Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 78.