

## 'GOD LIES IN THE DETAILS'

History is not sure that he said this but posterity has ascribed these words to Mies van de Rohe.<sup>1</sup> They have become a bead on the architectural rosary. Oft repeated, oft unthought, until they assume an inviolate status for the architectural supplicant. We need to believe the words were said by someone of his stature—otherwise we might playfully misread them as God telling lies: 'God fibs in the details'. But we cannot. They issue from Mies—fine, upstanding, well-dressed Mies—and as such transcend any mockery. The act of detailing has thus become a credo overseen by higher values. Architects claim this act as an integral part of their identity, a specific area of expertise, a demonstration of professional control which excludes the amateur. Detailing is one way in which architecture elevates itself above mere building ('architecture is not building' being another rosary bead). Builders simply do things as they know best through tried and tested method, a kind of industrialised vernacular. Architects on the other hand use their expertise in detailing to refine complex conjunctions through the application of technical and aesthetic judgement. Detailing is difficult—an act of penitence—which requires learning in order to reach the higher, spiritual, plane of the discipline. Starting with the novice, levels of expertise are defined and initiated each with increasing degrees of mastery.

This discipline of detailing sets architecture apart as a technocracy. Mies, and he really did say this, held 'that technology was a world unto itself'.<sup>2</sup> The architect / technocrat was divided from the world of the great unwashed—the surveyors, the public, the philistine. The architect's detailed designs are buildable only with specialised craftsmanship and expert labour. And to be fully appreciated the final products of this process require a certain aesthetic and technical sensibility, an initiation into the faith. A world set apart, architecture becomes an autonomous discipline defined in part by an adherence to certain principles of detailing.

1 Normally misquoted as "God is in the details", the attachment to Mies is given through the assurances of Philip Johnson: see Philip Johnson, "Architectural Details," *Architectural Record* (April 1964): 137–147.

2 Mies van der Rohe, "Architecture and Technology," *Arts and Architecture* 67, no. 10 (1950): 30.

Is this an overstatement? We believe not. Mies has another aphorism: 'Architecture begins when two bricks are carefully put together'. As Beatriz Colomina pithily notes, this is 'just about the dumbest definition of architecture that I have heard'.<sup>3</sup> But it is another maxim passed down through architectural culture, a signal of our removal into a technically defined world. Specifications, legislation, contracts, performance standards and Agreement Certificates—the list goes on—provide institutional policing of the territory. Individual architects cannot expect to cover the whole territory, because the demands set by technical standards are challenging. They do indeed require application and devotion. Added to this, signs of progress must be demonstrated—architecture cannot be seen to stand still—and this demands technical development. Detailing thus becomes an unforgiving treadmill of refinement and improvement, each conjunction judged in relation to its previous manifestation. Small wonder then that the territory is carved up and market niches are contested. Materials are classified (brick, glass, steel, concrete, wood, render) and methods of assembly are defined (hi-tech, eco-tech, lite-tech). Combine one or two from the first group with one of the latter and you have established an area of expertise. As in any language, only certain permutations are permissible, since transgression of categories affronts the rectitude and ordering of architecture.

## TRANSGRESSION

*The building was still rumbling, half-designed, around our heads when the call came. It was Interbuild, the largest trade show for building materials in the United Kingdom. They wanted us to build a section of our house on the main exhibition stand, in a display called 'Facades of the Future'. We were both flattered and gently amused at the idea of sneaking in a straw wall as an example of a pioneering future. A hairy Trojan horse. But we wavered. We had not even designed (or detailed) the wall yet, and the exhibition was to open in five weeks time. What swayed us was the promise that our exhibit was to be placed next to a section of the Lords Media Centre*

3 Beatriz Colomina, "Mies Not," in *The Presence of Mies* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1994), 201. Colomina quotes Mies here, but also doubts the veracity of the statement.

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by Future Systems, described to us as seven metres long and shiny. The temptation of juxtaposing our hairy agricultural wall with the smoothness of their nautically inspired technology was too much to resist—the more so since each of us were somehow associated with the sustainable pie. Future Systems' ecological claim to a slice was based on the weird logic that aluminium (the building's principal material) was recyclable. Forget the oilfields of energy required to convert bauxite into aluminium, just be consoled by the fact that in order to fulfil this logic the Media Centre will one day be melted down into billions of Coke cans.

Five weeks later we arrive, three amateurs (two of them women) in a self-drive van at a hall full of trucks and big, skilled, men. We have three days to erect a wall which will be seen by over 100,000 people using a method never previously used. The lack of any technological precedent is scary (we have to research everything from scratch and improvise where necessary), but also consoling since there is nothing to judge it against, our method is neither right nor wrong, it is just there. But this does not stop endless big-bellied men coming over, curious and judgmental, waiting to see something they can shake their heads about in the time-honoured construction industry tradition ('you're doing it wrong, mate'), allied with conspiratorial winks to Jeremy ('lucky bastard, all those women around, mate') before turning away to reveal the sartorial cliché of the builder ('seen the crack in your arse, mate?'). Ours was the final laugh when three days later our wall went up on time and according to plan, defeating their scepticism ('so who's sophisticated now, mate?'). Our only real disappointment is that when the promised seven metres of the Lords Media Centre arrives it has shrunk to a sample one metre square. Something about a 'problem with production'. Well, we thought (borrowing from the automotive industry<sup>4</sup>), 'Size matters'.

The exhibit is consciously polemic, and through this becomes a signal for the forthcoming building. We have added a twist to our detailing. We suspect we have been called in as the token eco-people: straw = hairy = handholding = female = amateur = crude = non-rational. A convenient conflation to salve the collective

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4 In a UK television advertisement for a car, a woman sits seductively in the Barcelona Pavilion whilst images of a small (but very efficient) car flash by. The punchline is: 'Size matters'.

conscience while others get on with the serious stuff. Our twist is to wrap the straw in a transparent polycarbonate screen sourced from an Italian DIY catalogue, so that the straw is exposed to view. It is a transgression of material and technical classifications. Slick meets hairy. The eco people are offended by the polycarbonate (plastics are not wholesome). The technocrats are confused by the natural stuff. That is two targets in one wall.



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## SERIOUS STUFF

The technocracy induced by the focus on the detail does not lead to the complete autonomy of architecture. Remember what initiated it: ‘God lies in the details’. In the Miesian canon, detailing possessed a quasi-spiritual status; attached to it was an associated morality which equated honesty and transparency in visual expression (and in particular the detail) with truth and order in society. As Ignacio Sola Morales notes: ‘The Miesian project in architecture is inscribed within a wider ethical project in which the architect’s contribution to society is made precisely by means of the transparency, economy and obviousness of his architectonic proposal. This is the contribution of truth, of honesty. That is Mies’ message.’<sup>5</sup> For Mies this was undoubtedly deeply felt; his philosophical and theological connections to such guides as the Catholic moralist Romano Guardini are well documented.<sup>6</sup>

Fifty years later the project to provide society’s salvation through recourse to architectural honesty, truth, economy of means and precise tectonics appears deeply flawed and delusional. It might even seem funny if it were not, even now, revered with such intensity. But we are not allowed to laugh at the hopelessness of salvation through good detailing. This is serious stuff, a moral project that still holds certain sections of the architectural community in thrall. David Spaeth, a self-confessed disciple of Mies, states: ‘because Mies is so personally exacting, his work so uncompromising, he continues to be the architectural conscience of the age. This alone makes him worthy of our continued attention’.<sup>7</sup> The word conscience is telling. It is as if architects are in a state of potential truancy, in permanent danger of straying. In our secular age, we redeem our guilt through penitence to the rectitude of detail and tectonics. These days it is not so much God that lies in the details but Guilt. Residual

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5 Ignasi Solà-Morales, "Mies van de Rohe and Minimalism", in Detlef Mertins, *The Presence of Mies* (Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 154.

6 see in particular Fritz Neumeyer, *The Artless World: Mies Van De Rohe on the Building Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), Chapter 6.

7 David Spaeth, "Ludwig Mies van de Rohe: A Biographical Essay," in John Zukowsky, *Mies Reconsidered* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1986), 33.

guilt that the redemptive claims of modernism have never been fulfilled, that the sins of society cannot be solved by architecture alone. Not wishing to confront this failure head on, the profession retreats to the higher ground of truth and honesty in construction, one of the few challenges the architect can control. Disciplined making has become a security blanket against the realities, disruption and disorder of everyday life. But it is a blanket that can, with a little thought, be unpicked, taking apart the unsustainable interweaving of the weft of morality with the warp of technology.

## FUN

*We are building a wall, the one next to the railway line, the one made out of sandbags. This technology has not been tested in London since the Blitz. We have been enthralled by an image of the Kardomah Coffee house in 1941, its full length plate glass windows shielded from German bombs by a wall of sandbags, with refined Londoners attempting to maintain a semblance of coffee-morning normality behind a crude architecture. Sixty years later memories have faded and appropriate skills have been lost. We are now having trouble detailing the windows; framing them in zinc or standard pieces of timber feels too precious. Lying around the site (once a forge for the neighbouring railway) are some old pitch-pine sleepers. In a moment of vernacular inspiration Sarah realises they will make perfect window surrounds and, together with the builders, sort out a way of making them work. In their making of the building, the builders have suspended their initial disbelief in the project, and have claimed the various unknown technologies as their own, construction pioneers.*

*Professor Gage visits us. He looks up at the sleepers. ‘It looks like you are having fun here.’ At first we are dismissive. Building one’s own house is a notorious graveyard of relationships; it is hardly the definition of fun. Then we are slightly affronted. Residual guilt about the seriousness and purity of architecture, perhaps. Finally, we are comforted by his words and are given the courage to laugh out loud when Steve the foreman labels the sleepers ‘Flintstone architecture’.*



## BEAUTY

Mies again: ‘Our real hope is architecture and technology grow together, that someday one will be the expression of the other: only then will we have an architecture worthy of its name, architecture as a true symbol of its time’.<sup>8</sup> Another of the moral imperatives for architects is to reflect the spirit of the age (whatever that means). One person’s take on the spirit of the age may revolve around third-world debt, increasing social exclusion and global warming. Another person’s may focus on increased consumer choice and better standards of living for the majority of western society. Architecture chooses technology as its zeitgeist because we have made technology our signifier of progress. Technical development prefigures an aesthetic

<sup>8</sup> van der Rohe, “Architecture and Technology,” 30.

genealogy of progress—increasing simplicity, less and less material, leaner and leaner structures.

In this will to represent the age, architecture loses its basis in rationality and becomes simply an aesthetic. Bob Evans is wonderfully clear in this. ‘We believe that Mies’s buildings exhibit a sublime rationality because so many people have reported seeing it there. These sightings are only rumours. if Mies adhered to any logic it was the logic of appearance.’<sup>9</sup> We have always been confused by the publication of details of Miesian mullions as if they have some semblance of logic—why are skinny little I-beams, apparently glued and ending in mid-air, expressions of rational construction? Clearly they are not. They are to do with an apparition of rationality that is tied into an aesthetic will to beauty. Mies masterminds this illusion with greater skill than anyone else. He even seduces a critic such as Roger Scruton, who is hardly known for his defence of modernism. ‘Some of the finest detailing of the modern movement was displayed by the immaculate lines and cruciform columns of the German pavilion’<sup>10</sup>—columns which are notorious for their structural sleight of hand.<sup>11</sup>

Mies’s approach is indicative of another bead on the architectural rosary, namely that beauty can be achieved through the application of rational principles. Rational structure is de facto beautiful. Scruton again gives unwitting sanction to the modernists’ white lie. ‘It is through studying detail that the architect can learn to impart grace and humanity to the most unusual, troublesome and disorderly conglomeration.’<sup>12</sup> Morality, detailing and beauty are again conflated, but the winner in this heady mix is the aesthetic control over disorder. When push comes to shove, rationality will be compromised in the pursuit of the higher goal of aesthetic perfection. No-one really questions the lengths that Norman Foster goes to in

<sup>9</sup> Robin Evans, “Mies van de Rohe’s Paradoxical Symmetries,” in Robin Evans, “Translations from Drawing to Building,” in *Translations from Drawing to Building* (London: Architectural Association, 1997), 269.

<sup>10</sup> Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Architecture* (London: Methuen, 1979), 213.

<sup>11</sup> see Evans, “Translations from Drawing to Building,” 239–249 for a brilliant critique of Mies’ disingenuous approach to structure.

<sup>12</sup> Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Architecture*, 211.



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constructing the image of structure to adorn the outside of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank. We take it for granted that the shiny, muscular, forms stand as an honest expression of the spirit of the age, because that is what modern architecture symbolises. But scratch beneath the skin and there is nothing particularly honest or rational here. Maybe, after all, God does lie, tell fibs, in the details.

## BRUTE HONESTY

*The plastic skin around the straw bales fulfilled a polemical purpose at Interbuild, but when it comes to building the house a number of contingent factors (legal, practical, economic, intellectual) push us towards another solution. This is to protect the straw bales with a cheap corrugated metal rainscreen. However we have all enjoyed the transparency of the plastic with the bales visible behind. (In most strawbale construction the bales are plastered and thus disguised). We decide therefore to have a large polycarbonate section set into the metal cladding. The question is how to do this. Should it be another window? Should it be symmetrical on the elevation? Should it be proportioned? Should it be framed? Finally, Gillian takes the job into her own hands.*

*When it is built, Jeremy gulps. Privately, he is shocked. The polycarbonate window randomly crosses windows, rounds a corner, cuts across elevations, lines up with nothing. In this building full of aesthetic disruption, the polycarbonate section pricks a deep-seated sensibility. Is Jeremy simply looking wrongly or rather, (because looking is always culturally predicated) thinking wrongly? There is a brute honesty in the detail. Maybe in all its gawkinsness it is not a bad detail. It is like an exhibit in a science museum where layers are cut back to reveal the underlying mechanism. It imparts to the wall a kind of vitality—the secret life of the building. It also serves a useful purpose in allowing us to inspect whether this life has an animal, vegetable or mineral involvement through invasion of rodent, rot or condensation.*



## GOOD DETAILS

Can there be any stranger front cover than that of the German magazine *Detail*? Where most architectural publications seduce the reader with pictures of smooth-skinned buildings basking under the sun, *Detail* has just a stark, black-lined drawing to entice the architect to look inside the covers of the magazine. A puritan ideal stripped of any excess. A signal of the aesthetisation, and with it fetishisation, of

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the detail in architectural culture.<sup>13</sup> Presumably only good details get onto the front cover.

A well-detailed building. A well-dressed man. Both sentiments of approval. It is no coincidence that Mies insisted on handmade suits from the Viennese store Knize, the same tailor that Adolf Loos used and for which he designed a shop.<sup>14</sup> Restrained. Understated. Authoritative. Speaking through its details. Apparently simple ends achieved through skilful execution. Miesian architecture and clothes—both aspire to the same effects. But what does a ‘well-detailed’ building really imply? The phrase signals an aesthetic judgement. So the good detail is the ‘clean’ detail, the ‘crisp’ detail. In the profession’s mythology, the architect has sole control over the mastery of these effects, and only fellow architects can truly recognise the extent of that mastery. The detail, coded and meticulously dimensioned, divorces design from public recognition, securing the rarefied realm of the architect/technician.

The good architect also has to be the good detailer—and by corollary the good detailer (who does nothing other than ‘good’ details) is judged a good architect. When OMA first started building, the architectural establishment had no way of controlling their affront (hardly surprising since Koolhaas hits so many of the sacred cows of architecture at once). But rather than articulating this affront through a sustained critique of the intellectual agenda behind the buildings, the disgust was concentrated on the details. OMA ‘could not detail’.<sup>15</sup> Bad details ergo bad architecture. Of course such attacks missed the target completely. Koolhaas continually displaces the object of architectural attention from its normative concerns—including detailing. OMA’s architecture is not badly detailed; it is made in a different way.

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13 For the fetishisation of the detail see Sarah Wigglesworth, "A Fitting Fetish: Interiors of the Maison de Verre," in Iain Borden and Jane Rendell, eds., *Intersections: Architectural Histories and Critical Theories*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2000), 91–108.

14 This is noted by Beatrix Colomina, op. cit.

15 As Hans van Dijk notes, ‘Koolhaas was prevented from his wish (in the late 1980’s) to be accepted as a working architect by *idée reçus* (he’s hardly built anything, he can’t handle detail) circulating among potential clients and the members of competition juries.’ Hans van Dijk, “Principles of Metropolitan Architecture,” *Archis* 1, no. 85 (January 1993): 23.

## FAT WALLS

*In a further mixing of classifications, we want to place the office element of the building on a domestic base. The aim is to evoke a set of cross walls 5.5m apart (the standard London terrace house dimension) as memories of the houses that might once have stood on the site; for this the walls should have the character of ruins, as if time has passed through them. At an early stage we chance upon the idea of using gabions, the wire cages full of rocks normally used in civil engineering as retaining walls.*<sup>16</sup>

*The original idea was to fill the gabions with rubble salvaged from the buildings we were to demolish on the site, but our engineers (incredibly tolerant of most of our structural transgressions) put a stop to this. We therefore decided to use lumps of recycled concrete. With construction waste from both new build and demolition contributing to 30%<sup>17</sup> of all landfill in the United Kingdom, the use of recycled concrete in the gabions is an extremely minor, but quite visible, signal of an alternative to this prodigious waste. The plan is to use the gabions as loadbearing structures, something never done before. The structural logic has an elegant simplicity about it; the lumps of concrete are used for their compressive strength, and when they attempt to move outwards under load, they are held together by the tensional strength of the wire cage. Of course this solution does not meet normative criteria of economy and elegance (exemplified by lean, taught structures), but why should engineering always be about the minimal? Why not an economy of excess? Gabions, delivered as flat pack, filled with a surplus by-product by unskilled labour, and with a simple structural logic. So far so good.*

*The reality, as ever, is somewhat different. On the positive side, it is cheaper to bring a truck of recycled concrete to site than it is to take a truck of rubble away. With the introduction of a landfill tax in the United Kingdom in 1998, stockpiles of used aggregates have grown up around the fringes of cities. This is cowboy country, a*

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16 For detailing genealogists, this idea came prior to the publication of Herzog de Meuron’s exquisite Napa Winery, with its welded gabions and carefully considered cut stone.

17 The BRE puts the number at 17%, the Waste Council at 45%. We split the difference as an indication of the difficulty of quantifying sustainable issues.

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*marginal (and quite black) economy of trucks shifting around sand, cement and stone in various states of cohesion. We set out into this strange territory, clambering over small hills of crushed concrete, tape measure in hand, attempting to find lumps which will fit the gabion cage without spilling out. In one yard, Jeremy has a gun pulled on him as he leaves, carrier bag full of samples ('only joking, mate, you just looked a bit of a wanker'). In the end our effete tracking system is fruitless, and we have to rely on the builders' bush telegraph (Steve's brother drives one of the trucks) to find a source.*

*More of a problem is the gabions' structural integrity. Theoretically their loadbearing capacity is massive, six times more than required for the job. The Building Inspector, however, will have nothing of it. In the case of fire the wires will melt, the rocks will spill and the office above settle down onto a ruined landscape. It might sound interesting, but it does not meet the Building Regulations or norms of convenience, and so we are required to cast sacrificial columns in the centre of the gabions as we erect them. We do this with some regret, inculcated as we still are with traces of architectural guilt concerning structural honesty.*



*This structural solution also changes the spirit of the constructional technique. We had enjoyed the idea of erecting industrial flat packs and randomly chucking in pieces of concrete. The job now becomes more complex, and as with much else on this site, the skill has to be learnt from scratch. Martin, our project manager, here assumes as much a role in the design as do we. Between Martin, Steve and Pat (a carpenter by trade) and ourselves a method of construction is arrived upon, which is then adapted and refined by Pat when building work starts. They, and not us, assume aesthetic control over the process and far from randomly throwing in rocks, they hand place them. At the entrance, in a prominent position, is a piece of shiny granite. We have yet to ask Pat whether this placing is an accident.*

*When the gabions are finished they feel magnificent, like some standing stones an archaeologist has uncovered on site. At this stage, we are visited by a large group of German architecture students, on a tour of London buildings. They are hot-foot from, and exhilarated by, the Lords Media Centre (we are haunted by this building). We can sense their unease in this muddy site with unfinished straw walls and rough, excessive, gabions. And then one asks, smirking because he thinks he has found our architectural Achilles heel: 'Those big walls, they are loadbearing?' With the answer, the admittance of the hidden column, one can see (tight mouths turned down) the whole group's unease transform into rank disapproval.*

## THE SIGNIFICANT DETAIL

Against a tendency towards the aestheticisation and technisation of the detail, some writers and architects have upheld the signifying, significant, role of the detail. In his influential article, 'The Tell-The-Tale Detail'<sup>18</sup>, Marco Frascari optimistically interprets Mies 'God lies in the details' in terms of ascribing meaning: 'the detail (here) expresses the process of signification, that is the attaching of meanings to man

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18 Marco Frascari, "The Tell-Tale Detail," in Kate Nesbitt, ed., *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture: Anthology of Architectural Theory, 1965-95*, First. (Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 500-514. When we were teaching in the USA in 1991, the article had samidzat status.

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produced details'.<sup>19</sup> In Frascari's version of tectonics, the act of making is not a mere technical exercise but one which brings with it inherent meaning, so that the joint (as the most intense manifestation of detailing) is 'the place of the meeting of the mental construing and the actual construction'. Frascari holds up Carlo Scarpa as an exemplar, pointing to the way that Scarpa's approach to drawing overcomes the separation of design and construction which is evident in normal technical drawings. In Scarpa's drawings, with their multiple scales, projections, and renderings 'the marks on paper are analogues for the processes of construction and construing'.<sup>20</sup>

Architecture can speak through the joint, and in so doing the detail becomes a unit of signification in a language of construction. However, Frascari notes that this language is not read through a structuralist analysis of visual referents, but through a phenomenological engagement with architecture through the senses and an appeal to archetypal conditions. Thus Kenneth Frampton urges us to consider the 'ontological consequences' of the differences between the frame structure and the mass wall, that is to say 'the way in which framework tends towards the aerial and the dematerialisation of mass, whereas the mass form is telluric, embedding itself ever deeper into the earth'.<sup>21</sup> The argument is that through the careful attention to the choice, disposition and jointing of materials, matter is transformed from mere stuff into something which has significance. In this way detailing transcends the limitations imposed on it by the conventions of aesthetics or technics alone and becomes a means of summoning up deeper, more authentic cultural resonances.

The argument for the significant detail is seductive, but it may in the end share the same myopia as an obsession with refinement. Frascari's identification of the detail as the basic unit of architectural signification is at one level a truism, but the resulting implication that architecture resides in the detail leads us up a dangerous

atomistic path in which the detail is treated as an isolated artefact divorced from its wider spatial context. Frampton's 'call to order' is initiated in opposition to the scenographic excesses of post-modern architecture. He has a suspicion of avant-garde exercises in spatial production, where progress is announced through new formal paradigms. Against such spatial (by which he means formal) distractions, Frampton argues that a return to the material base of architecture is necessary to overcome the 'cultural degeneration' of the process-driven, commodified, globalised, society at the end of the twentieth century. His almost touching faith in the power of architecture to re-establish a counter position is misplaced in its reliance on the agency of the detail (as artefact). With this small-scale focus, Frampton myopically avoids a confrontation with the wider social and political context in which architecture is situated, and to which it must react. In this light, his claim for tectonics as a point of resistance 'against the commodification of culture'<sup>22</sup> looks fragile.

The warning signs may be found in the citing by both Frampton and Frascari of Scarpa as a master of significant tectonics, pointing in particular to the Brion Cemetery as an exemplar. As architects we all love this stuff and make pilgrimages across the hot Veneto plain to join other architects clambering over this intensely private place. Death. That's the most poignant moment of all for an architect to address and it brings out in Scarpa the most elaborated set of encrustations of his career. Lots of meaning. Lots of detail. But it wasn't the excess that bothered us—the place is still extraordinary—it was the desperate American architecture students (Frascari in back pocket) who ignored all clear signs (*privato* – that's clear in any language) to climb over gates into the inner sanctuary just to get a frontal view and all-important photograph of THAT detail. The silly one, – we've said it now, that's us excluded from the high table – the gate opening mechanism with wires contortedly looping their way around pulleys.

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19 Ibid., 500.

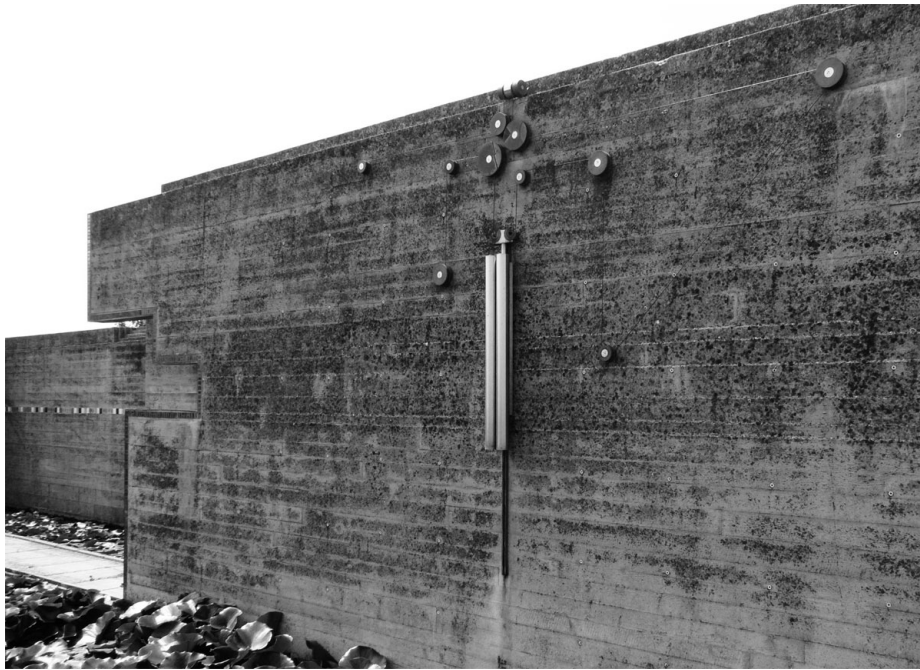
20 Ibid., 507.

21 Kenneth Frampton, "Rappel à L'ordre: The Case for the Tectonic," in *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture: An Anthology of Architectural Theory 1965-1995* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 522. His term 'call to order' is indicative of an approach which sees the detail as an essential element in establishing visual coherence – and with it a more general order.

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22 Ibid., 527.





The students' faces nod up and down as they trace their way through these lines following the path of the mechanism. In a cemetery, that most primal of places, architects lose their heads, and humanity, in the complicated technics of a detail.

This is where one should sense danger: in the ability of even a 'significant' joint to distract. It is the same at the Barcelona pavilion; even if Mies' overload of visual effect and Scarpa's intensely worked materiality are clearly different in their means, the end is the same. The Barcelona Pavilion, as Bob Evans notes, 'distracts ... it is the architecture of forgetting'.<sup>23</sup> But this is not the gerontic forgetting of the amnesiac, this is a conscious forgetting, a displacement from 'a confrontation with

<sup>23</sup> Evans, "Translations from Drawing to Building," 269.

violence and politics'.<sup>24</sup> The detail becomes a place to get lost in, a turning away from the world beyond. The forgetting induced by a myopic attention to the detail is also a forgetting of the social and political implications of spatial production. Of course the making, detailing, of buildings contributes to this production, but it is only part of an interlocking matrix of relationships. The true resistive strength of architecture lies in its engagement with the various sites of contemporary spatial-social production, and not in its rearguard retreat into the essences of tectonics.

#### DIRTY NAPPY

*Somewhere in the Seven Lamps,<sup>25</sup> Ruskin says that a carriage on springs can never be considered in the same light as architecture. We did not set our office on springs just to spite him—they are there to damp the juddering from the passing trains—but we still like this stick in the eye to Ruskin's pious morality. The office balances as a thin wedge over the mass of the gabions. The springs give it a precarious feel that flies in the face of the corporate stability normally associated with offices. The office is usually seen as a place set apart from the home and architecturally assumes an identity of decorum and order. There is a gender thing going on here, in the separation of the wilful domestic from the ordered office, and the identification of the female with the former and male with the latter. In our project, and in our lives (the two are intertwined by now), such separation is both impossible and undesirable. In a confusion of categories we wrap our place of work in a soft quilt. We want it to feel like domestic upholstery, puckered and buttoned, deflating any corporate pretensions. There is a gender thing going on here as well.*

*We have invented our own DIY method of achieving this effect, but are nervous about it and so consult experts who have worked with the knights and lords of British architecture. An architectural genealogy is beginning to establish itself in the late twentieth century use of fabric. Frei Otto–Hopkins–Horden–Rogers. It is clear from*

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 270.

<sup>25</sup> In the second paragraph of chapter 1 in John Ruskin, *Chapter 1: The Lamp of Sacrifice*, vol. 8, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

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*the expert's reaction that our proposed solution does not fit into this family tree. It will flap and tear, he says. It will pucker irregularly, he says. It will not be absolutely tight, he says. We are convinced enough by his arguments (in our nervousness we overlook how he conflates technical and aesthetic criteria) that we get him to quote for a highly stretched skin which only they can erect. They will have to fake the upholstery buttons that we have specified as fixing positions.*

*When it comes, their price is four times our budget. It is a Barcelona Chair when we can only afford an Ikea Chesterfield. So it is back to the DIY. A small sailmaker on the South Coast (an unwitting nod to technology transfer—what delicious irony if our cladding were made next to the South Coast shipbuilders who made **that** building, the one that haunts us) makes up the lengths that are then wrapped like bandages round the office. This other technology brings with it associations beyond our control. The builders quickly nickname it 'the nappy' ('that should stop any architectural shit coming out from the office'). Both our fathers ask when we are going to put up the final cladding—the quilt is too soft and fragile for them to cope with. More worrying is when an affronted student asks at the end of a lecture why we are doing this. 'What's wrong?', we ask. 'It is going to look dirty in few years time'. Dirt is clearly a threat to the sanctity of proper architecture, ergo our building is not proper.*

*It is lucky that we have not told her about our plans for the sandbags. We intend for them to get dirty, to get rough, but unpredictably. As the bags decay ('we regret the delay to the 10.05 Edinburgh train, hessian on the line') the sand-cement-lime mixture inside them will set hard. When the bags finally disintegrate (who knows when) their woven pattern will be left on the rippling wall, surface osmotically melding with solid. Most walls are detailed to shrug off the effects of time, but this is a wall that has been designed to allow time to pass through it, and thereby to modify it; an evolutionary architecture.<sup>26</sup>*

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26 See Jeremy Till, "Thick Time," in *Intersections: Architectural Histories and Critical Theories*, ed. Iain Borden and Jane Rendell (London: Routledge, 2000), 156–183.



#### OTHER DETAILS

For a discipline that addresses such a broad range of cultural conditions, the range of building materials employed by architects is exceptionally restricted. Architecture controls its boundaries through the definition of 'appropriate' materials

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and their subsequent transfiguration during the act of detailing.<sup>27</sup> Materials not included in the canon do not carry with them the recognisable genealogy of expertise and refinement that accords the architect his (sic) status. The only permissible supplementation to the limited canon of materials is through technology transfer, a mechanism by which architects draw on the technologies and innovations in other industries and adapt them to the demands of building. This transfer both provides architects with a technical authority and also signals progress in their work. Boat-building, armaments, bio-technics, motor industries, electronics—a select band of ‘progressive’, ‘advanced’ or ‘hi-tech’ industries—are raided for inspiration. Rarely is there an interest in a technology transfer from ‘lower’ or commonplace techniques, representing as it would a dilution of the self-defined authority and status of the architect. Materials from the vernacular (mud, thatch), the do-it-yourself shop (plastic, pine), mass-produced industry (cheap cladding panels), the domestic (fabric, paper, card) are considered outsiders. These are the materials of the everyday, a category of life from which high architecture has always set itself apart. These materials are regarded with suspicion, and the buildings which result from them are considered a degraded form of architecture.

For too long architecture has erected a defensive wall around itself, technically refining matter and twiddling with form in the deluded belief that this alone is enough. It is time to cross over these self-defined walls and engage with wider cultural forces. It is time to break the hold of authority and mystification that the technocracy of architecture has induced. The materials of the everyday, and their associated technologies present an opportunity for architecture to open up its gates. The everyday does not respect the limited classifications that architecture has founded itself on; it asks why architecture is disinterested in the normal; it encourages us to transgress. This is an expansive and empowering move which allows architecture to reconnect as

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27 In addition, materials are increasingly excluded through the threat of litigation. Lists of approved materials and constructional systems are becoming commonplace—and in some cases being insisted upon—by anxious insurance companies. Under current legislation it is the responsibility of the designer to prove compliance with regulation when using materials and/or techniques which fall outside the legal framework.

process and product with the vicissitudes of life. But to do this requires a loosening of the definition of what constitutes architecture. Relax, boys. It is acceptable for architectural technologies to be claimed by others (women, amateurs, untrained eyes) and for architecture to claim other technologies. Not only acceptable, but necessary if architecture is not going to exhaust itself chasing the next technical advance or blind itself by squinting at close-ups of buildings banished of time and life.

Our own experience suggests that storming the bastion of architecture by throwing transgression at it is a fruitless exercise. As we write the building is still not complete but brickbats—neat, dumb, Miesian brickbats—are already being thrown. ‘Too many ideas.’ ‘Too much going on.’ ‘Inconsistent.’<sup>28</sup> These are not meant as compliments. But we grab them gladly and, rather than waste our time throwing our own rougher bricks back at the bastion, walk out of its gates and into a wider, more welcoming world.

This would remain just rhetoric but for another force that compels words into action. The environmental crisis brings all notions of technical neutrality to a juddering halt. It imposes on us an imperative to make judgements which transcend the limitations of the aesthetic or the rational. Can the making of architecture ever be judged ‘good’ again if it is knowingly unsustainable?

Environmental considerations give rise to a new value system in which many of the iconic details of the twentieth century are suddenly recast in different light. They are in fact bad details, lacking connection to values lying outside the tiny concerns of architecture. Distressingly the environmental movement is in danger of being hijacked. On the one hand by disingenuous technocrats who have quickly changed their spots and are now trying to solve a problem created by (their) technology by inventing yet more. They apply the rules of technical determinism to arrive at a moral high ground, software programmes at the ready to justify how ‘green’ their buildings are. On the other hand there are eco-fundamentalists who potentially force the movement into a regressive cul-de-sac, in which unquestioned

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28 As Adrian Forty pointed out to us, consistency is a cardinal rule of detailing, because it is the mark of the single, master architect who controls everything. By being inconsistent, we break this rule.

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spatial (and thus social) patterns are disguised under a thick, woolly, coat of worthy greenness. For this camp, spatial invention is seen as a distraction from the central issue of sustainability.

Our own way forward—in progress and fluid—takes seriously the issues thrown up by the global environmental crisis, but not in a way that excludes other social and cultural forces. It is a future which is not fully controllable or measurable—this is not a sign of weakness but an inevitable condition of architecture. Compromises are necessary and important if one is to engage with forces outside the neat boundaries that architecture has erected. Judgements have to be made. It is a future which is hairy.

#### CONFESSION

*We have shadow-gaps around the doors.  
They look lovely.*

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