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STRANGE DETAILS

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FOREWORD: A MURDER IN THE COURT

The title of Michael Cadwell's book, *Strange Details*, not only borrows from poet Seamus Heaney, but also recalls the emphasis placed by the Russian formalists on the question of "literariness." Citing the ambiguous state of fact and fiction in both historical and artistic documents, the formalists' aim was to point out the "devices" that underlie all kinds of literary production. Focusing on form, they shifted their attention away from content to the material reality of the text, and the transformation, deviation, or "violence" that was perpetrated on everyday speech. Through deformation, they argued, ordinary language was "made strange," resulting in defamiliarization (or estrangement) that, in turn, would force an awareness of language—jolting the reader out the familiar state of distraction and into a heightened self-consciousness.¹

Drawing on this literary analogy, one might argue that a building is intensified through the elaboration of its own medium—a *language of sticks and stones*—to induce a state of architecture. The "material" that underlies architecture is somehow rooted in construction and its details, and yet beguilingly, the devices that engage the building practice are most often in tension with the seemingly direct necessities of fabrication. Herein lies one of the most fertile and debated topics in architectural theory: the subject of tectonics. At the heart of this debate is the dilemma posed by the necessities of fabrication, which rarely coincide with the intended expression of a building, even in those projects whose

1. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

authors profess an ethic of truthfulness or honesty to the facts of material construction.

Gottfried Semper addressed this dissonance when he identified the deceptive coincidence between aesthetics and physics in his description of rustication in traditional European architecture: "The stage by stage diminishing of the force implicit in the structural components, as you rise from the ground upward, seen everywhere in better architectural masonry, corresponds at the same time to a principle of beauty and dynamics."² Though his description may be seen as a mere integration of the two principles, Semper elsewhere differentiated them as "inner structure" and "artistic schema," articulating the difficulty of bringing technical facts into alignment with certain perceptual intuitions. As such, the "bearing of weight" is not simply a constructive problem of statics, but also a challenge for the construction of meaning. In his study of Semper, Michael Podro argues that "the architect can mark a real feature, suggest a fictive one, and in doing the latter may well involve masking some aspect of what is really there, as in the concealed breaks of the fluted columns or in a typical piece of medieval window masonry where the supporting colonettes are merely sculptural elaboration cut into the stone courses," further pointing to the rhetorical artifice in acts of construction.³ Though Podro is here referring to an intended sleight of hand, he is also pointing to a more fundamental slippery relationship between construction facts and their corresponding aesthetic effects—even in cases where the expression of architecture and its method of fabrication are in closer alignment.

The relationship between the fictive and the factual certainly predates modern dilemmas, and the entasis of a Greek column

has been similarly theorized. When, during the Renaissance, the architect's role was separated from that of the builders' guilds, there developed the relative autonomy of two disciplines in architecture: drawing and building. From the modern period to the contemporary scene, this takes on a new institutional guise in the way law defines the division of labor between architect and builder. The architect is charged with the design; the builder is responsible for the means and methods of its construction—as long as it remains faithful to "design intent." While this legal provision may seem a guarantor of design implementation in general, it significantly disempowers the architect and presents several theoretical predicaments. First, the law effectively severs the architect from the "specific" relationship she or he can construct between the technical specification of an artifact and its corollary effect—the assumption being that the architect's investment is in the image and its rhetoric, not in its constructive makeup. Second, it further problematizes the relationship between design intent and material construction by not offering a mechanism of control to determine the degree of association between them; this often happens through performance specifications, substitutions, and additional alternatives that are woven into contracts—as if to suggest that any detail or any material will suffice, so long as the general effect is delivered. Finally, the law also suggests a broader problem by cloaking the "many" means and methods available to the contractor, which are arguably the root substance of architectural production. How can one not, for instance, differentiate between a cast-in-place concrete wall and a precast one, without simultaneously broaching significant material and philosophical questions? Severing the architect from the means and methods of construction is somewhat like permitting the writer to use a certain vocabulary, but disassociating it from the very alphabet from which the text emerges.

2. Quoted in Michael Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), 48.

3. Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art*, 48.

In the 1970s and 1980s, when the emphasis on semantics, the production of meaning, and the communicative function of architecture took center stage, the question of construction waited in the wings. In many ways, both theory and the evolution of the legal system helped divorce architecture from the medium of construction. The most recent advancements in digital fabrication techniques have once again redistributed the power between the architect and builder—this, the result of the unmediated and immediate connection between drawing software and their corollary translation into fabrication paths. For these reasons, among others, Cadwell's book emerges at a critical moment, reasserting the centrality of the tectonic—with the detail as its accomplice—to take on a mission with significant cultural currency.

While Cadwell's immersion in his four subjects is broad—encompassing questions of the landscape, the cultural context, and the specifications of their architecture—his emphasis is on the strange place of the detail as manifested in the construction of four seminal buildings. The meticulous description of Mies's columns at the Farnsworth House is exemplary of the presence of the rhetorical question in Cadwell's conception of construction—precisely because of the multivalent ways in which the column can be read. If Semper's analysis of the effect of bearing weight identifies the girth of masonry as its proof, then Mies negates this very phenomenon to produce the illusion of weightlessness, denying the actual forces present on the columns at Farnsworth by having the columns cleverly slip outside the very roof they are meant to uphold. In addition, his refusal of bolts, and the effort put into grinding off the subsequent weld marks—in essence, to conceal the facts of construction—demonstrates the sophisticated tension and ambiguity in Mies's mischievous attitude toward construction. If the bolts would have held up a building just fine, then for Mies, only their elimination could uphold a principle of ar-

chitecture. In this way, Mies's most paradigmatic invention at the Farnsworth House is a detail that he summarily proceeds to erase. The predicament, of course, is the result of the contradictory disciplinary mandates he has inherited: namely, to negotiate between technical and perceptual imperatives, which are at odds with each other. On the one hand, if he operates under the ethics of cost and efficiency, he must forgo the conceptual inversion that is offered by the effect of weightlessness. On the other hand, if he is to remain faithful to the rigors of the tectonic expression, then he must submit to a means and method that cleanses the steel of its surplus excretion—in essence, inducing an alignment between the purity of construction and its corollary effect, even if at a greater effort and cost. Mies's erasure of the welds is not simply rhetorical; they do not just *say* something, they *do* something. Imagine, if you will, a murder in the court of the Ryugen—in Temple, after which the perpetrator meticulously proceeds to rake the site of the crime. Is he covering his footsteps, or is he submitting to the rhetorical ethic of the Japanese garden? Mies, too, covers his footsteps, but he does so to uphold architecture, and his only crime is to expose the choices that construction has offered him.

In his writings, Cadwell unveils those choices, and he carefully balances the subtle and intricate ethics involved in the construction of architecture. He sets a task of identifying the difficult relationship between construction and the story of architecture—as if buildings could speak—using its details as witnesses to the narrative. But also, in recognizing the architects' medium, Cadwell foregrounds the importance of drawing as a form of communication: as a construction proscription, as expression, and as a mode of materializing the architect's peculiar and strange language. In turn, he extends the discourse on tectonics well beyond the "tired old insistence that construction must illustrate the structural strategies marshaled against gravity." Equally dissatisfied with

the obsessions of expression, semantics, and the symbolic function of architecture. Cadwell calls for a broader reading of the discipline linking aspects of construction, landscape, drawing, and perception in a more complex narrative that repositions a vision of architecture in the world, even if at the cost of killing an older one.

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