THEORIZING A NEW AGENDA FOR ARCHITECTURE
AN ANTHOLOGY OF ARCHITECTURAL THEORY 1965-1995

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INTRODUCTION

Architect Marco Frascari, like Vittorio Gregotti, locates the source of architectural meaning in construction, in particular in the "formal and actual joints" between materials or spaces. In his influential essay, Frascari argues that the joint, the original detail, is the generator of construction, and therefore of meaning. The tectonic detail is thus the site of innovation and invention. Frascari defines architecture as the result of the design of details and their resolution and substitution.

While functioning pragmatically, the "end" detail can also be seen as an aesthetic expression of structure and use. Frascari's semiotic reading suggests that the detail is the minimum unit of signification within the architectural production of meaning. As in Gregotti's "The Exercise of Detailing," this chapeter Carlo Scarpa's work is chosen as exemplary because "each detail tells us the story of its making, of its placing, of its dimensioning." This idea of narrative permeates the article, for instance, in the intriguing idea that joints are pretexts for generating narratives. This is possible, Frascari claims, because the detail or joint can impose its order on the whole. Thus, "end" or "technical" is an endless set of architectural ideas.

The "techne of logos," which can be understood as the production of discourse, is the aspect Frascari calls construing. Like Martin Heidegger, Frascari is interested in the etymological connections between words, in this case between constructing (building) and construing (giving order and intelligibility to the world). Furthermore, Heidegger asserts that dwelling is the purpose of life and depends on building. The linguistic connection to Heidegger's phenomenology lends credibility to Frascari's link between constructing (details) and construing (meaning) and constituting (meaning). A slight digression into perceptual psychology nonetheless makes a contribution to his argument, in stating the detail as the perceived structure for apprehending architecture as meaningful. In its emphasis on returning architecture to its origin in tectonics, seen as generative of meaning, Frascari's essay touches on several important postmodern themes.
The notion that architecture is a result of the "art of logos."3 Details can impose order on the whole through their own order. Consequently, the understanding and execution of details constitute the basis process by which the architectural practice and theories should be developed.

The second part is an analysis of the architecture of Carlo Scarpa (1906-1979), a Veneto architect. In Scarpa's architecture, as Louis Kahn pointed out, "detail is the adoration of nature." The architectural production of this architect, in which the adoration of the making of joints is almost obsessive, allows an empirical interpretation of the role of detail in the process of signification, seen within culturally definable modes of construction and construing. In Scarpa's works the relationships between the whole and the parts and the relationships between craftsmanship and draftsmanship allow a direct substantiating in corpore viti of the identity of the processes of perception and production, that is, the union of the construction with the constraining in the making and use of details.

Dictionaries define "detail" as a small part in relation to a larger whole. In architecture this definition is contradictory, if not meaningless. A column is a detail as well as it is a larger whole, and a whole classical round temple is sometimes a detail, when it is a lantern on the top of a dome. In architectural literature, columns and capitals are classified as details, but so are jamb, noted, piers, and porches. The problem of scale and dimension in those classifications and the relationship between elements and unities makes the dictionary definition useless in architecture. However, it is possible to observe that any architectural element defined as detail is always a joint. Details can be "material joints," as in the case of a capital, which is the connection between a column shaft and an architrave, or they can be "internal joints," as in the case of a porch, which is the connection between an interior and an exterior space. Details are then a direct result of the multifaceted reality of functions in architecture. They are the mediate or immediate expressions of the structure and the use of buildings.
The etymological origin of the word “detail” does not help at all in understanding the architectural use of the term. In architectural literature, the term appeared in the French theoretical works of the eighteenth century and from France spread all over Europe. This spread was caused by the coupling of the term with the concept of “style,” and by the active influence of French literary criticism and theory upon the French neo-classical architects. In 1670, Despreaux Nicolas Boileau, in the first part of his *Lettre Poétique*, warning against the use of superficial details in poems, sets an analogy between an overdeftled palace and an overdeftled poem. By the eighteenth century this analogy was commonplace and, applying it to Montesquieu, Giovanni Battista Piranesi attacked it as trivial in his defense of his architectural theory of overdeftled buildings.

The French theoreticians of the *architecture parlante* were the ones who formally consolidated the role of detail in architecture’s production. In the analogy of the “speaking architecture,” the architectural details are seen as words composing a sentence. And, as the selection of words and style gives character to the sentence, in a similar way the selection of details and style gives character to a building. This powerful role of the detail as generator of the character of a building was also pointed out by John Soane in his lectures on architecture: “Too much attention can not be given to produce a distinct Character in every building, not only in great features, but in minor detail likewise; even a moulding, however diminutive, contributes to increase or lessen the Character of the assemblage of which it forms a part.”

In the Berne-Arts tradition, the understanding of the role of detail as a generator of the character of buildings determined a very peculiar graphic means for the study of it, the *analytique*. In this graphic representation of a designed or surveyed building, the details play the predominant role. They are composed in different scales in the attempt to singe out the dialogue among the parts in the making of the text of the building. Sometimes the building as a whole is present in the drawing, and generally it is represented on a minuscule scale, and so it seems a detail among details. The origin of the *analytique* and its role in the construing of architecture can be traced back to the technique of graphic representation and composition developed by Piranesi in his etchings surveying the Magnificenza of Roman architecture. These are a graphic interpretation, with a stronger Vichian bias, of Carlo Lodoli’s understanding of the built environment as a sum of inadequate details to be substituted with more appropriate ones. Another form of the *analytique*, analyzing the architecture of Italy can be found in the back of Italian art today.

It is important to notice that the *analytique* as graphic analysis of details had its development in a period in which architects did not have to prepare working drawings showing the construction of the details. The drawings carried few if any details and dimensions. The designer could be almost entirely dependent on his craftsmanship. Builders had no need for drawings to show details whose execution was a matter of common knowledge. Construction of details was planned out among the various tradesmen, who supplied the necessary knowledge for making them. The same craftsmen who furnished the information for the *Encyclopédie* of Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert were able to construct the drawing with the exact eye of the artist, and the *analytique* was simply the source for the understanding of the ordering role of a single detail in the overall composition.

The production of details as it was established before the development of the industrial society and motivated by different cultural needs, began to become problematic in a predominantly economically motivated society. No longer considered as long-lasting cultural and social repositories, buildings came to be viewed as economic investments with an intertemporally pluralist short existence. Two polar reactions had developed from the change that occurred in the scope of edifices. One of the reactions was the value building use no longer inferred the construction of the detail from the design drawings. The details were studied and resolved on the drawing boards. Draftsmanship was substituted for workmanship, and the development of “real details” was replaced by “visual details.”

The second reaction was the change that occurred in the role of detail is the one that can be exemplified by the architecture produced by the Arts and Crafts Movement. The second reaction was the change that occurred in the role of detail is the one that can be exemplified by the architecture produced by the Arts and Crafts Movement. The second reaction was the change that occurred in the role of detail is the one that can be exemplified by the architecture produced by the Arts and Crafts Movement. The second reaction was the change that occurred in the role of detail is the one that can be exemplified by the architecture produced by the Arts and Crafts Movement.

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The geometrical and mathematical construction of the architectural detail is in no sense a technical question. The motive should be regarded as falling within the philosophical problem of the foundation of architecture in geometry, and ultimately within the theories of perception. The processes of designing, ordering materials, and building a house are techniques in the same way geometry is a technique by which the designer, the builder, and the user of a house transform the appropriate sign with a view to predicting the occurrence of certain events. This technique (geometry) provides us with a structure for describing the built world, a conceptual framework into which the designer, the builder, and the user can fit their empirical experience. Geometry shows how to draw a shape from another shape by transformation.

In this guise geometry does not state facts, but gives us the forms in which to state facts. It provides us with a linguistic or conceptual structure for the construction and the conceptualizing of a building. The geometrical structure embodied in the architectural details do not state facts but rather provide a structure for stating facts within a "scale." They give us a way of making comparisons that meaningfully relate visually perceived architectural details. The notion of the individually perceived details can be illustrated with the phenomenon of "indirect vision" as explained by Hermann von Helmholtz:

The eye represents an optical instrument of a very large field of vision, but only a small very narrowly confined part of that field of vision produces clear images. The whole field corresponds to a drawing in which the most important part of the whole is carefully rendered in the area being thusly sketched, and sketched the more roughly the further it is removed from the main object. Thanks to the mobility of the eye, however, it is possible to examine such every part of the visual field in succession.

Helmholtz's research in visual perception persuaded him that sensory stimuli only supply signs of the presence of architecture, but do not give us an adequate understanding of it. Such signs, that is, the details, acquire a meaning by virtue of which they become a vehicle of knowledge through a long process of association and comparison and through a sort of geometric relationships.

The geometrical relationships embodied in the details in a built environment as well as in a natural environment set the understanding of the large field of vision. The geometrical relationship or proposition at the base of the compound part of the High Gothic architecture expresses in itself every feature of the imposed superstructure. Such relationships are the results of the transformation in space of the second requirement of Scholastic writing, of an arrangement according to a system of homologous parts and parts of parts. The details in this way, while forming an indivisible whole, are identifiable as parts of the built world, a conceptual framework into which the designer, the builder, and the user can fit their empirical experience. Geometry shows how to draw a shape from another shape by transformation.

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The problem of perception of details within the sphere of architectural appropriation is stated by Walter Benjamin:

Building is an approximation to a two-fold manner by means of perception or rather by means of sight. Indirect perception is accomplished not so much by attention as by habit. As regards architecture, "literate" means in a large and wide sense optical reception.

This is an empirical theory that regards all perception of space as depending upon conventions and rules not only qualities, but even details as nothing more than signs, the meanings of which are learned only by experience. These conventions are the basis for architecture understood as existence, form, and location of external objects. These Gestalts are the ideas or signs of objects resulting from an interpretation of sensations that is carried out by processes of unconscious geometrical inference. The placing of details has a key role in these processes of inference. The
visual sensations guided by the tactile sensations are the generator of the geometrical propositions. In architecture, facing a handful, walking up steps or between walls, turning a corner, and noting the sitting of a beam in a wall are coordinated elements of visual and tactile sensations. The location of these details gives birth to the conception, that is, a meaning in a perception. The conception of the architectural space achieved in this way is the result of the association of the visual images of details, gained through the phenomenon of indirect vision, with the geometrical proposition embodied in forms, dimensions, and location, developed by touching and by walking through buildings.

The act of detail is in its most sophisticated and learned form in the work of Carlo Scarpa. An analysis of the concept of detail in Scarpa's architecture can best be begun with the words of Lonise Kahn:

In the work of Carlo Scarpa, design is the first sense, the first word, the first sound, the inner realization of Form, the sense of wholesomeness of inseparable elements. Design consists in the giving of presence to the elements, in a work of art which manifests the violence of Form in the symphony of the abstract shapes of the elements. In the elements of the joint innate movement, its reflection. The detail is the adoration of Being.

The art of detail in Scarpa's architecture is a perfect realization of Alberti's concinnity. Each detail tells us the story of its selecting, its placing, and of its dimensioning. The selection of the appropriate details is the result of singling out its functional roles. The details of Scarpa's architecture solve not only practical functions, but also historical, social, and individual functions.

Scarpa's architecture can be generally classified as the merging of the principles of the organic architecture as expressed by Frank Lloyd Wright with a learned detailing of Veneto craftsmanship with a blend modern and ancient technologies. However, the definition is inadequate; whereas Scarpa's understanding of Wright's architecture was notative, based on an appreciation of photographs and drawings, his understanding of Veneto craftsmanship was active, based on his daily working and dealing with the stonemasons, mosaic painters, glaziers, and smiths of Venice. The result is a modern architecture that is more than natural structures and functional spaces. The reaching of functionality is present in Scarpa's work, but the functionality is mediated by the search for representation and expression through the making. Scarpa's architecture stands against the bare structure of logic, it stands for the union of reason and verbis, that is, for the union of representation and function. This concept rules Scarpa's architecture from conception to expression. In his architectural objects, he is the generator, becomes the manner of production of signs that are the details. The light of the artistic construction, which results from the expression of Veneto craftsmanship, becomes the dialectical counterpart in the generation of the details as signs. Scarpa's buildings show indeed a constant search for between the actual form (the built one), and the virtual form (the perceived one). The constant manipulation of the discrepancies between virtual and actual forms is the method used for achieving expression. "In architecture," Scarpa once said, "there is no such thing as a good idea. There is only expression."

The analysis of Scarpa's detail can be satisfactorily managed visually only by a continuous comparison between drawings and built objects, on the one hand, and the historical, practical, and formal reference that generated any single detail, on the other. It is also necessary to see Scarpa's details from two different sides. On one side, his detailing is the result of interfacing of design and craftsmanship on the site and of the constant "sensorial verification" of details during the assembly of the building. Scarpa made a practice of visiting the building site during the night for verification with a flashlight, thereby controlling the execution and the expression of the details. In the normal daylight it would indeed be impossible to focus on details in such a selective manner. It is also a procedure by which the phenomenology of the indirect vision becomes an element in the process of decision in the design. The flashlight is an analog of both the process of vision and the eye movement. In its perception field (with only one spot in focus and the eye darting around). Another Veneto architect, Piranesi, used the same technique in visiting the sites of the buildings he was going to survey and represent in his engravings of the Antiqua Romana. To single out the "expression of the fragments," that is, the details, he used the light of a candle.

On the other side, Scarpa's details are the result of an intellectual game performed on the "working drawings" that are the result of the interfacing of design and craftsmanship. That game is the matching of the construction of a representation with a construction of an edifice. The relationship between architectural drawings and buildings is generally thought of as a Cartesian representation based on visual matching of lines. However, Scarpa's drawings show the real nature of architectural drawings, that is, the fact that they are representations that are the results of constructions. They are a constituting of perceptual judgments interfaced with the real process of physical construction of an architectural object. The lines, the marks on the paper, are a transformation from one system of representation to another. They are a transformation of appropriate signs with a view to the predicting of certain architectural events, that is, on the one hand, the phenomena of construction and the transformation by the builders, and on the other hand, the phenomena of construing and the transformation by the possible users. Consequently, on the same drawing there are present several layers of thought.

A design is developed by the same technique in which the drawing is made. The continuous inference process on which the design process is based is transformed in a sequence of marks on paper that are an analog for the processes of construction and construing. The piece of drawing paper selected for supporting the slow process of the construction of a
of casting as generator of mouldings. In the bank, especially in the wall constructed by Antonio Avena in 1924.

In the Museum of Castelvecchio, the medieval equestrian statue of Cangrande and the Romantic replica of the Cemetery, the ziggurat is executed in cast concrete, and it is a celebration of the possibility of casting as generator of mouldings. In a lecture given at the University of Venice (1976) he described the architectural making of this corner. The achievement of the effect of light occurs by a formal manipulation. The solution of the formal cause solves the final cause. He described it as "clipping off the blue of the sky," a formal cause, but the result was the lighting of the wall, the final cause. His own words are the best description of the making of an architectural detail:

"I have a lot of natural light. I wanted to clip off the blue of the sky. Then what I wanted was an upper glass recess. The glow corner became a blue block pushed up and inside the building, the light illuminates all the four walls. My bias for formal solutions made me prefer an absolute transparency. Consequently I did not want the corner of glass in the inside. It had been a tour de force because it was not possible to obtain that idea of pure transparency. What I overlook the glass is the source anyway especially if the glass is thick. One may as well put in the frame. Then, besides this, if it is a clear day one may see the reflection. Look, when I saw the reflection I hated myself. I did not think of it. These are mistakes which one makes in thinking, acting, and making, and therefore it is necessary to have a double mind, a triple mind, the mind like that of a robot: a man who speculates, who would like to rob a bank, and it is necessary to have that which I call art, an attentive tension toward understanding all that is happening."

The development of architecture in the works designed by Scarpa proceeds by steps and stages. These are in the contrasts. Each detail represents an interim result that cannot be considered a final result. Scarpa would invent details the precise architectural functions of which would become clear only after they had been used in several different designs. The range of these architectural functions goes from the immediate to the meditative, from the understanding of the meaning of the detail. This creative use of details in design is fully in accordance with [Gabriel] Wittgensheim's understanding of a creative use of language. The "exact" meaning, that is, the function of words, would only become known by a later use. A function of detail in a design becomes clear by re-presentation, that is, re-use. The detail often appears impossible and vague in its structuring principle. But, relating in itself function and representation, the re-use of a detail becomes a creative catalyst. It becomes a fertile detail. The re-use of details is analogous to Richard Wagner's re-use of leitmotifs. The leitmotifs are structural devices used by Wagner to assemble and reconstruct the architecture of opera from within and are the smallest units of significance in the musical text. Scarpa's details are structural devices used to assemble architectural text from within.

A case of fertile details in Scarpa's architecture is the use of the "ziggurat" motif. The architectural function of these fertile details emerge in the Brion Cemetery at S. Vito d'Altivole and in the facade and the interior of the Banca Popolare di Verona. In the Cemetery, the ziggurat is executed in cast concrete, and it is a celebration of the possibility of casting as generator of mouldings. In the bank, especially in the facade, the ziggurat detail is a prima domina in Rosa Verona, the bronzed-like local red marble in which it is executed.

Scarpa's first use of this detail was a cosmetic treatment of a temporary facade executed by piling up concrete blocks in front of the Italian Pavilion at the 1962 Biennale in Venice. But in architecture has pointed out, the primary root of "cosmetics" is "cosmos." This iconographic detail becomes the principle of order in Scarpa Museum of Castelvecchio in Verona. The ziggurat detail becomes the solution for terminating the layers of the wall of the facade to show the virtual joint between the original walls and the Romanic replica of the facade wall constructed by Antonio Arenà in 1924. In the Museum of Castelvecchio, the medieval equestrian statue of Cangrande and...
the structure which supports it are set in a spatial location that allows a view from the balcony, the bridge, and the court below. This location allows one to view the statue from close-up as well as from below, as it was seen in its original location on Cangrande's shrine. This joint originates the full text of the spatial organization of the Castelvecchio Museum. It thus becomes the cause for the formal solution of the museum and the text in the context.

An early design of the platform holding the statue of Cangrande shows it as the pretext for a celebration of the visual joint determined by its collocation. This drawing shows the idea of the ziggurat as a generator of the wall. The layers of the wall become independent units and each one of them is expressed in a vertical ziggurat. The space opened up by the cutting of the facade wall helps the whole composition of the new arrangement of the museum devised by Scarpa. The space, a virtual joint, is then the key articulation in the museum's path, but at the same time becomes a "negative joint" in the articulation of the masses of Castelvecchio. The open space, instead of separating, helps connect the left and the right masses of the castle. These are situated on the sides of the tower which articulates the joint between the bridge on the river Adige and the castle.

The selection of the ziggurat as the ending of the wall mediates the transition between inside and outside of the articulation. It exposes the materials of this complex architectural hinge composed of vertical planes defined by their framing relationship with the statue of Cangrande, the visual pin of the hinge. The ziggurat detail is also used in many other parts of the museum. In a study plan of the entry, this fertile detail is used in solving the joining of the stones used for the floor as well as in solving the deep reveal of the windows in the thick medieval wall.

The ziggurat detail is also used extensively in the Brion Cemetery. The material, cast in place concrete, gives new meaning to the detail. The interaction between form and material moves the fertile detail from the realm of a production sub specie utilitatis to a production of sub specie aeternitatis. It is construed as a "ruin" loaded with memories before time. It becomes a perfect detail for the architecture of a cemetery, a place of memories. In this use the ziggurat finds its proof of being a fertile detail. A detail proves its fertility when it moves out of a private architectural language and becomes available through a collective production. A famous case of this is the Serliana Window that after being used by Palladio became a standard detail known as the Palladian Window. The Scarpaian Ziggurat has indeed been used by many architects in their designs, but now is used in collective architecture. It has become a standard detail of Veneto cemetery architecture. The neoclassical temple in antis which has been the type for many family chapels has been modified by a new model reference. The detailing of the Tuscan or Doric Orders has been replaced by a new detailing, a concrete cast-in-place Scarpaian Ziggurat, a New Order.

To conclude this discussion on the role of detail as a minimal unit in the process of signification (that is, the manipulation of meaning), it is useful to note that architecture is an art as well as a profession. This is because of the understanding generated by the detail as joint. Architecture is an art because it is interested not only in the original need of shelter but also in putting together spaces and materials in a meaningful manner. This occurs through formal and actual joints. The joint, that is the fertile detail, is the place where both the construction and the construing of architecture take place.
The joint is the beginning of ornament
And that must be distinguished from
decoration, which is simply applied.
Ornament is the adornation of the joint."

3. The idea of the process of signification in the details can be traced through Thomas Aquinas's work.

4. In jotting down the data concerning the adaptability of the joint, I had a lapsus, and instead of spelling God with one s, I spelled it with two. Look on the page opposite; my notebook is presented, a note taken from a passage from Vitruvius's treatise on architecture, De Architectura, S. Faro, ed. and comm. (Rome: 1962), 70. A few days later, while reviewing those notes, I was amazed by the presence of the quasi-Platonic transcription of a quasi-theological maxim-i.e., "good lies in the detail"-next to a note stating that Callimacus, the mythical designer of the Corinthian capital, whose name in Greek means "he who struggles for beauty" had been misconceived. Callimachus was, by the Athenians, by the Egyptians, a being who excelled in the activity that proceeded with rational method toward a specific productive aim and in the knowing of the doing. "Zeit h" is, in the doing.

5. The idea on ornament has been developed in the sixteenth century, for instance, Antonio Conti's theory of ornament is presented in the first book, but its technical development is later. See: 2-8.

6. This tripartite discussion of beauty is developed by Alberti in his treatise, De Re Aedificatoria, (Bologna: 1485; repro Milan: 1966).


11. For a different approach, see Dr. F. von Soden, Aesthetics of Architecture (Waterford: 1979), 7-16.


13. A joint is a distinctive feature of both the building itself and of the way it is organized in use. Ovanes and repeated usage are the base of functionality. Architecture can only perform its functions also signifies its functions and can be organized in four functional horizons: the practical, the historical, the social, and the individual. For a discussion of the four functional horizons and a typology of functions see J. Martin, "The Place of the Aesthetic Function Among the Other Functions in Architecture." in Structures, Signs and Functions, (New Haven: 1979), 249-243.

14. The French commercial origin of the word, which differentiates between the selling of slices of pizzas and the sale of whole ones, besides clarifying that details are parts, does not help in understanding the detail as a whole and in maintaining a relationship with wholes.

15. A joint is a distinctive feature of both the building itself and of the way it is organized in use. Ovanes and repeated usage are the base of functionality. Architecture can only perform its functions also signifies its functions and can be organized in four functional horizons: the practical, the historical, the social, and the individual. For a discussion of the four functional horizons and a typology of functions see J. Martin, "The Place of the Aesthetic Function Among the Other Functions in Architecture." in Structures, Signs and Functions, (New Haven: 1979), 249-243.


17. For a survey and discussion of the different elements and theories developed in architectural semiotics see Martin Jay, Aesthetics of the Urban Environment, (Chicago: 1984).


19. For a different approach, see Dr. F. von Soden, Aesthetics of Architecture (Waterford: 1979), 7-16.

20. A joint is a distinctive feature of both the building itself and of the way it is organized in use. Ovanes and repeated usage are the base of functionality. Architecture can only perform its functions also signifies its functions and can be organized in four functional horizons: the practical, the historical, the social, and the individual. For a discussion of the four functional horizons and a typology of functions see J. Martin, "The Place of the Aesthetic Function Among the Other Functions in Architecture." in Structures, Signs and Functions, (New Haven: 1979), 249-243.

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