

Architecture and Sexuality: Process of Constructions

If we perceive the built environment through a particular cultural and societal lens then does it stand to reason that we behave according to those perceptions? If so, do construction details regarding the material assembly of physical space contribute to our perceptions and, accordingly, behavior?

Identity is something that is perceived. That perceived identity is based on human behavior and, in turn, behavior also influences that perceived identity. The image of a person begins to describe one's identity as well. Labels and type of dress can hint at one's regional context and socioeconomic standing. One's identity encompasses such a wide range from physical appearance to character nuances. Humans take up space and impact others whom they come in contact with. The details of their persona and image make their identity; their identity creates an impression within built space.

Architecture uses a design process that is similar to the fruition of one's personal identity. A building has its own identity. It has its own cultural context, an environmental context, and a physical presence. Much like a human, a building's identity influences memories and meanings about a specific environment in which it inhabits. These memories are shaped by the haptic experiences of the user in which they engage while moving about the building. Users are also cued by the social interaction that is happening within that space. The physical construction of the space is not the primary factor that manipulates one's personal constructions. The physical construction is something that creates the nuance of space. The detail of a connection has the ability to create an aesthetic based on how beautifully or cleanly the materials come together. The materials have the ability to influence the formality of the space, as does the lighting design.

Construction details map out the physical construction process for a builder. It is one of the smallest elements in the construction documents, but it is also one of the most important as it lays out exactly how to bring materials together in order to create the feel, the aesthetic, essentially the impact that the built space has on those inhabiting it. Inhabitants are not aware of the process of formulating the detail's inception in the design process all the way down to the process of actually constructing it. The designer sees this process all the way through. He leaves a piece of himself subconsciously in that process. It is almost as if it becomes a piece of art, we interpret the art based on what we know of the artist's personal experience and cultural context. Most of these variables are not exactly known. We can only interpret what we see.

Returning to human identity, one's sexuality is something that is internal to the human body and psychology. Yet it is something that manifests itself in behavior or an interaction. We begin to code sexuality by using physiognomy, clothing, and body language as signifiers to suggest our own individual sexual being. This sexual being is something that we personally develop, something that is based on our own sexual appeal, appetite, and frequency of sexual encounters. One's own comfort level with their sexual self can be seen in their confidence levels. It is a persona that any person takes on and uses in society. It is very similar to the way we choose to act in a given social situation based on religion, socioeconomic class, or any other various hierarchies that create acceptable, or normative behavioral patterns.

Sexuality is something that is usually hidden in almost all day-to-day situations. It is something that manifests itself behind closed doors (given that most don't have voyeuristic fetishes). There are normative sexual behaviors that come with acceptable

processes for a given cultural context. Within most religious views, sex is between a husband and a wife. There is a process of courting, dating, and engagement before the actual consummation of the marriage. In that time period, one is expected to remain a virgin or abstinent. Obviously this cultural expectation is not continuing as such a priority, but it can also be argued that there is a new culture of the heterosexual lifestyle that places more emphasis on the sexual desire of people.

In much the same way, those that identify as homosexual have a slightly different expectation of normative sexual behavior. Because the homosexual identity already breaks the normative gender and sexual roles, there is less of an expected role. The process to get to the sexual act is not as prescriptive. The heterosexual identity also has the same freedoms, which are becoming a more normative behavior pattern. But there is a different expectation to conduct themselves in a more sexually conservative way. The homosexual is almost expected, or assumed to be very sexually active and promiscuous.

The process of coming into one's sexual identity, no matter if they are at either end of the spectrum of identity is based on experience. There are cultural expectations that manifest themselves both physically and psychologically. From those expectations one takes their own desires, instincts, and pressures in the decision process to choose to act on the desires or withhold. Once that choice is made the experience of a specific sexual act begins to determine an identity and the persona you give off. The metaphor of the closet begins to come into existence at this choice. The "closet" is used by any identity that needs to hide a part of themselves from the rest of the world. It is a term that is most specifically used for the process of coming out of the closet about identifying as homosexual. But people also come out of the closet for identifying as agnostic, sexually active, one's socioeconomic class, basically anything that one deems as embarrassing or not socially acceptable for the social situation in which they are engaged.

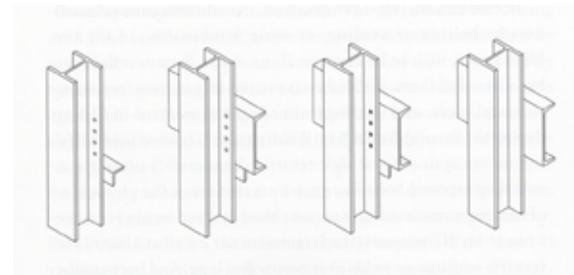
Architecture's design process is the maturation of a building into its social context. It is the conception and production of every aspect of its aesthetic nuance. The public

perceives a building in two ways: its outward appearance and its function. This is potentially problematic as aesthetic choices influence the formality of a building. This in turn affects the social guise someone must take on. This character guise that one assumes is based on a social hierarchy that is predetermined by the function of what happens within the building. The aesthetic language can reinforce the social hierarchy by material choices and the way they are connected to the overall design.

Mies Van Der Rohe's Farnsworth House

The Farnsworth House is a modernist gem whose construction process can be analyzed in a parallel way to how sexual identity is constructed. Michael Cadwell, a professor of architecture at Ohio State University, describes this process in his book *Strange Details* as follows:

"steel erectors first drill the columns with holes at the beam connections and fit the columns with erection seats; they then place the perimeter beam on these seats, shim the beam level, and clamp it secure; next, welders plug the vacant column holes, fusing the column to the beam; and finally, finishers remove the erection seats and sand all surfaces smooth. Curiously, these connections require a sequence of operations that demand a high degree of craft, yet each operation disappears with the next. The mechanical craft of the seated connection disappears with the industrial craft of welding, the industrial craft of welding disappears with the handcraft of sanding, and the handcraft of sanding disappears with its own operation. There is no glorification of technology in this curious sequence, just as there is no remnant of craft."¹



The detail described is the only connection that can be seen, but it is not true to the actual process of its construction. The function of the construction detail is hidden behind a mask created by the construction sequence.

This sequence becomes a metaphor for the way in which architecture acts as a closet, hiding certain functions and in this case material connections. As Cadwell suggests, the sequence vanishes any trace of how it is constructed, and all that is left is an image projected within the site.

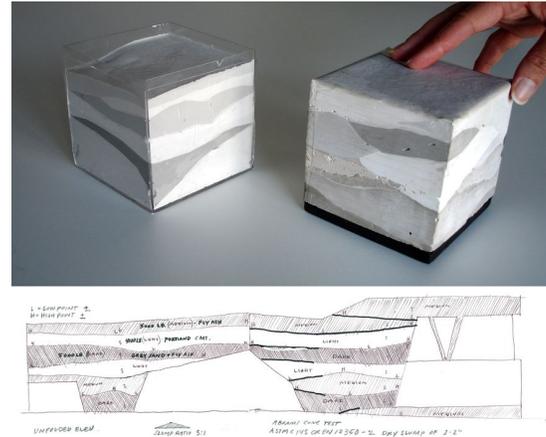
The process of construction that is described by Cadwell is not a normative detail. It requires a level of refinement that makes the building more expensive. The craft of the detail is so highly labor intensive and refined because it comes from a design process that is not delineated by budget. The normative detail would assume an economy in material cost as well as labor expense. Therefore welds and bolts would appear rather than the smooth painted aesthetic that even hides the sanded plug weld. The normative detail does not have a narrative about it, it doesn't create an aesthetic that is about art, but Mies plug weld detail masks the entire process that creates the final aesthetic. Essentially the final product is all that appears and there is no demonstration of the process at all that got it to its identity.

Studio Gang's SOS Childrens' Villages

The use of concrete in the SOS Childrens' Village Community Center came about because there was essentially no money for the project at all. Almost all of the building material came from donations by manufacturers and builders in the Chicago area. Therefore the vision for the building was not conceived then detailed. A new process to design came out of the donated "kit of parts". Jeanne Gang and her studio used the donated concrete to create an aesthetic that is designed yet also speaks to the construction process of poured-in-place concrete. Jeanne and her team chose to reveal the concrete, but in a way that artistically layered multiple colors and different slumps of concrete to achieve a concrete cantilever creates an entry opening the building to the street. It is a playful experimentation that speaks about the material.

The design process became about the construction process. The concrete becomes this façade that hints to its exact construction process. The fluidity of the concrete while it is being poured is expressed in the wavelike striations of the façade. The slump of the

different striations changes based on the stresses that are created in the building form. The concrete is this shell that encloses the building, but it lifts up creating a cantilever that opens through glazing as the building's entrance.



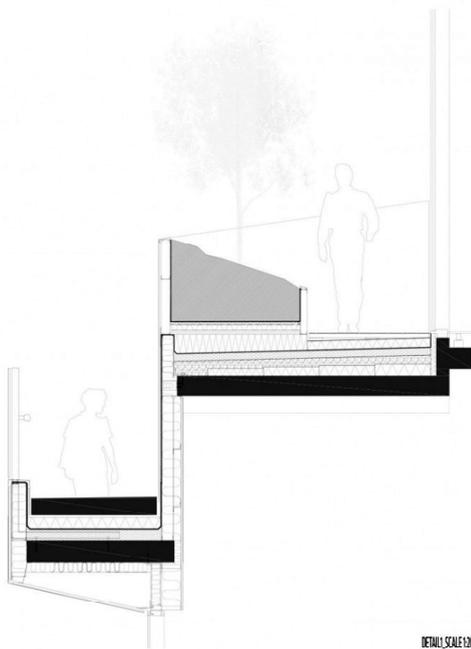
Jeanne Gang uses a process that asks concrete to become something that it is not normally used for. She doesn't change the texture by using wood formwork. She doesn't hide its structural functions. Instead, in her design process she investigated what the identity of concrete is all about. She looked at the different ways of pouring concrete, a dryer slump or a wetter slump to achieve the colored striations that correlated to the way the building functions aesthetically, structurally, and programmatically. Studio Gang's process to inform the design from the structural identity of the material then led to aesthetic and programmatic choices that made the design that much more sophisticated. Its sophistication however translates into a building that is about the donated materials to charitably create a sophisticated place to enrich the lives of foster parents and the children living in their care.

Bjarke Ingels' 8 House

8house by Bjarke Ingels is a unique urban housing condition. It is situated in a growing residential neighborhood with many large scale housing projects planned to surround it. The 8 house is the product of a unique design process. Ingels turned the normal design approach into something that delineates a process of questioning normative, or prescribed design moves for block housing,

and created a unique community environment.

As seen in the process diagrams above, Ingels takes the typical perimeter blockhouse and begins to use site context to inform its form. He also uses the different program functions to create social space on the exterior. The courtyard space is lined with a walkway that circumnavigates the entire complex rising and falling at different parts of the building. This social space is lined by low walled patio spaces for the maisonette dwellings that are above the commercial space in the first and second stories of the building. Whenever Ingels changes the programmatic function of the building, the floor plate shifts and creates an outdoor public space that relates to the circulation around the building



The detail shown here is a pretty normative way to detail a concrete floor slab on the exterior. It is covered with insulation to increase the R-Value for the interior space. It is sloped to drain water toward the façade of the building. The material connections are lapped with flashing. All of these actions are typical for a building in a northern climate. However this is a dichotomy of semipublic and private spaces occurring at this particular

detail. The proximity of the patio walkway to the sloping walkways

This detail addresses the functional aspects of the building in a relatively normal or expected construction process. The design of the building is a specific response to the issue of social housing. The apartments are open two ways, to the exterior and onto an interior courtyard. That interior courtyard faces the rest of the units with open balconies. This isn't a new concept, but the materiality of these balconies is very transparent and reflective. Also the semi-private walkway that works its way around the interior of the courtyard also plays with the concept of voyeurism. One can view the social interactions happening, as well as being able to see into the private spaces of others. The behavior of the community that happens between the architectural features is influenced by the way the inhabitants can view each other, which is a direct correlation to the way that those transitions between private, semi-public, and public are detailed.

The construction details of a space have a gendered identity to the components that already suggest a certain sexual identity. There are obviously male and female connections. These have blatant connotations of which material is penetrating the other. Obviously this is a direct parallel to sexual roles that are gender prescribed. Within queer identities, the gender sexual roles begin to shift, there is a change in process of the way the masculine gender functions. One can argue that men take on a specific sexual role of becoming the "top", "pitcher", the one doing the penetration, or the "bottom", "catcher", the one being penetrated. But one's sexual role may shift based on the chemistry with the person with whom one is engaging in sexual activity. The queer sexual roles imply a masculine and feminine dichotomy during sex, although, the sexual act is coded as normative to society. The normative view of sexual roles is obviously that which appears more common, the heterosexual relationship. Queer sex reverses gender roles in the bedroom as well as in the home.

The process of breaking the normative identity is based on experience. Construction details create an experience that is based on the material choices in the aesthetics, however the detail may be constructed in a normative construction method or through a more

refined process of detailing. The efficient and economical use of material makes a detail become more normative. As the detail falls under certain functional expectations, it becomes a typical process of construction because of its efficiency. However when architects begin to shift the paradigm of the function of the detail, as Mies Van Der Rohe did in the Farnsworth House, the normative identity of the detail begins to shift. The craft in its construction process must become more refined and the resultant expression of the aesthetic is not what is normally expected of a typical detail.

When one expresses a material during the detailing process, the architect expresses the functional and aesthetic properties of a material. Concrete for example works in compressions the best, but as Jeanne Gang demonstrates, by changing the workability, or slump, or the concrete she can use reinforcing to allow the concrete to work in both tension and compression. She designed the material to go beyond its normative function. But that choice is also based on its physical appearance. That physical appearance is a

conscious choice by the architect and it causes the material to behave in a less normative way. The additions of steel reinforcing beneath the surface allow the concrete to act in this way, but that is also an expected process within the construction because of building code. The way that Studio Gang really queered the construction process was by expressing the fluid pour of the concrete. The process didn't call for two pours that would regulate the concrete into a monolithic appearance, but she used multiple pours with different color and different slump properties that correlated to the structural stresses on the wall.

Bjarke Ingels' 8House is an interesting example of social housing and architecture's ability to create community. The physical space influences the human interaction and perception of others as well as oneself. Your social and physical environment influences your personal character constructions; a building's social and physical environment also influences the way its image is perceived to the people that dwell within it or experience it from the outside.

¹ Cadwell, Mike, 1952-. 2007. *Strange Details*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press. p 113.

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