Call for Papers Clara #11
The Ethics of Detailing
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The Ethics of Detailing
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The notion of detailing, in its contemporary sense of design at the scale of an assembly or fragment, emerged in the second half of the 18th century, gradually becoming widespread in architectural practice during the following century (Picon, 1988). This appropriation of detailing marks the transition from a so-called *conventional model*, where the transition from architectural design to its execution complied with traditional know-how shared by architects and builders, to a *prescriptive model*. In the latter, the architect imposes on the builder a specific way of making and on the constructive assemblies a determined and controlled appearance. The standardization of building techniques in the 20th century, far from overshadowing the use of details, further strengthens its role in individualization (Dupire *et al.*, 1995; Estevez, 2001).

The emergence of detailing, closely tied to the development of prescriptive practices, came together with a willingness to reform construction by aligning it with the principles of objectification inherent to "modern sciences" (Pérez-Gómez, 1988; Rondelet, 1802). These transformations, aimed at the efficiency and profitability of production chains, continue to operate today in the decomposition of tasks, the hierarchy of knowledge, and the social stratification of labour (Ferro, 2005; Aureli, 2023). The authority thus acquired by the architect in the socio-technical order of construction makes detail a specific subject for architectural design.

Indeed, in architecture, detailing has the capacity to unveil the construction and its articulations, as much as it can assist in concealing them in service of an abstract architectural expression (Ford, 2011). This expressive role gives the architectural detail a significant place in construction theories, ranging from those that invoke the moral register of authenticity (Frampton, 1995; Steinmann, 2004) to those interested in constructive fiction (Frascari, 1984; Simonnet, 2001; Levine, 2008).

The current multidimensional crisis, encompassing environmental, societal, and political dimensions, highlights the limitations of modern theories of detail in their ability to shed light on contemporary design practices (Destombes, 2017). How can detailing define a critical entry point to question the socio-technical dynamics of architecture? Can detailing constitute a driving force of an architectural agency aiming to retrieve the construction process from the productivist and extractivist frameworks in which it is enclosed? What meaning should be attributed to the very notion of architectural detail in the face of the profound reorganization of design practices driven by digitalization and the tendency to strip the architect of the prerogative to prescribe construction?

This 11th issue of *Clara* architecture journal focuses on contemporary detailing practices and their ethical implications. While the notion of ethics can refer to some kind of moralism, placing God—or conversely the devil—in the details, its definition also links it to action. In fact, ethics is defined as "the science that deals with the regulating principles of action". Yet, in the production of architectural detail, the one who regulates action is rarely the one who executes it. Thus by examining detail through the lens of ethics, this issue invites contributions

that might help deconstruct the separation between design and construction.

On what type of scientific approaches can such deconstruction rely? In his book *Paris ville invisible*, Bruno Latour introduces a paradoxical methodological approach by suggesting the study of complex objects (city, building, institution, social group, etc.) based on the observation of any of its elementary entities, taken indiscriminately and without distinction, which he calls oligoptic. This approach subverts the principle of hierarchical decomposition (Reiser+Umemoto, 2006) insofar as it underpins a more horizontal process where "we do not move from the particular to the general, but from the particular to other particulars" (Latour *et al.*, 2012: 211). Oligoptics thus allow for problematizing the notions of order and scale by considering that "the whole is always smaller than the part" (Latour *et al.*, 2012). Following Latour, we propose to consider detail as the precise observation point for the vast dynamics affecting architecture on relational, environmental, and temporal levels.

Track 1. Ethics of Relations, Empowerment and Collective Practices

The growing separation between thinking and making is accompanied by a relational impoverishment in the social process of construction (Lefebvre *et al.*, 2021). The prescriptive model implies "a relationship of subordination from the person who defines the work toward the person who carries it out. [Prescriptive technology] is not a relationship, but a writing, a mediation" (Dupire *et al.*, 1995: 18). This compartmentalization seems to lead to a loss of skills throughout the architectural production chain, and to the proletarianization of trades (Stiegler, s.a.), while it obscures the provenance and real environmental and human cost of detail (Malterre-Barthes, 2021).

At the same time, we are seeing a proliferation of community, collective, deliberative and situated actions. These modes of intervention seem to rely more on incremental processes (Dionne, 2015) than on global planning through detail. This first track of research thus considers thinking about detail as equivalent to political thought. How and by whom are details produced today? In what way can thinking about detail encourage a repossession of craft knowledge and be a lever for fostering the empowerment of and collaboration between the various actors in construction?

Potential topics of interest include:
– self-building/do-it-yourself (DIY)/socialization;
– tolerance/productive errors/"forgiving details" (Allen and Rand, 2007);
– changing production relationships in architecture;
– updating professional knowledge/detailing and craftsmanship;
– (in)visibilization of work and gestures;
– narratives of the construction process.

Track 2. Ethics of Frugality and Long-Term Environmental and Architectural Perspectives

The imperatives of performance (thermal, acoustic, waterproofing, etc.) lead to a complexification of construction, particularly at the level of detail (Wigley, 2021). In contrast to this trend, the principle of frugality places emphasis on material resources and existing conditions over the pursuit of technical performance. It aims to limit the environmental cost of architectural production, reconnect social and technical structures of construction at a territorial scale, and inscribe architecture within the long term (Madec, 2021).

To what extent does detailing allow for exploration of convergences between these seemingly opposed environmental doctrines? How do contemporary detailing practices confront challenges of the long term: maintenance, reparability, obsolescence (Leatherbarrow, 2009; Abenia, 2019; Caye, 2020)? If detailing initially focuses on the assembly of manufactured products, to what extent does it allow for a resemanticization of conventional distinctions between construction products, materials, matter, and waste (Lloyd Thomas, 2007)?

Potential topics of interest include:
– attention to resources/territory;
– performance/efficiency/effectiveness;
– matter/materials/products;
– opacity/transparency of detail;
– use/maintenance/repair.

Track 3. Ethics of Reversibility, Digitalization, and the Disappearance of Detail

With the advent of digital technology in architecture, detailing has reached a level of constructive explicitness that appears to bring the design itself into a logic of predefinition. Contemporary digital models, particularly Building Information Models (BIM), act as complete digital explanations of the material constitution of a project (Gaudillière-Jami, 2022; Alexander, 1964). The construction of these models increasingly relies on catalogues of products and components, placing the architect in a complex informational universe. Within this, strategies of assembly, combinations, and variations are applied to objects of "high definition" (Estevez, 2020: 13). These logics also enable subtractive logics in architecture (Easterling, 2014), such as Reverse Engineering Protocols (Devlieger, 2017). This axis positions detail as a site for architectural reversibility thinking. What methodological consequences can this principle of constructive exhaustivity have on design? Does the anticipated definition of built architecture paradoxically trace a form of detail disappearance?

Potential topics of interest include:
– retro-engineering and new professions in architecture;
– thinking of reuse, recycling, and reinterpretation;
– open source/open-ended detail/non-deterministic representation;
– ready-made/assemblage-based design.

Contributors to this issue are invited to cross these three tracks to consider their possible interactions and thus contribute to defining the ethics of contemporary architectural detail. In this definitional perspective, this issue encourages reflective contributions in design theory, architectural education, political economy of construction, and experimental and artistic practices.

Clara Journal
Clara is a peer-reviewed scholarly journal in architecture dedicated to topics, research methods and tools specific to the field. Each issue comprises a main thematic section proposed by guest editors, and two additional sections: *Archives*, with articles based on the exploration of archival documents, and *Position(s)*, with articles that take a stance on current developments or events in architecture. The latest and forthcoming issues of Clara address architectural criticism (#7), the architecture and landscapes of agrarianism (#8), intermediality in architecture (#9) and collective housing (#10). To know more about the journal: https://clararevue.ulb.be/CLARA/about.

Modalities
Proposals for contributions should be submitted to **clara.archi@ulb.be** by the 15th of April 2024 (single PDF file as attachment) and must include:
– an abstract of 500 words,
– a proposed title,
– the contributor's name,
– the contributor's academic affiliation (if applicable),
– the contributor's e-mail address and
a short bio of maximum 100 words
Proposals for contributions may be submitted in English or in French.

Provisional deadlines
– **Mid-February 2024**
  Call for contributions
– **15th of April 2024**
  Submission of abstracts by email to clara.archi[at]ulb.be
  Pre-selection process according to thematic relevance
– **End of May 2024**
  Notification of acceptance
– **Mid-September 2024**
  Submission of full papers by email to clara.archi[at]ulb.be and peer-reviewing process
– **November 2024**
  Feedback and comments from reviewers
– **End of December 2024**
  Submission of final papers
– **Spring 2025**
  Editing process
– **Summer 2025**
  Publication of Clara #11

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