

MICROSTRUCTURE I

I am an architect. I have spent my life trying to find forms — for buildings mainly — in which people may feel themselves at home. As part of my work I have delved deeper and deeper into the actual making of buildings. Not just the obvious structural part, but the fine tuned fabric of which the building is made. Its members, floors, roofs, wall patterns, and floor details — in sum, the way the building is made at the microscopic level.

In the course of this, I have become more and more aware that the beauty of the building does not depend only on the beauty of its site, its plan, and its rooms, but on its fine structure as well. That is the small stuff, the way the boards meet, the small carving on the head of a stair rail, the embossed pattern in a ceiling — which make the building good or not.

What is often called the “detail” of the building — its fine structure — is not some kind of icing on the cake, but the essence of what it is and how it makes its impact upon us. The detailed pattern and ornament of which a building is made is as much the essence of its structure as the arrangement of sodium and chlorine atoms is the essence of salt, or, as the detailed arrangement of the amino acids is the essence of a human chromosome.

But 20th-century art has been very bad at handling this level. We have become used to a “conceptual” approach to building in which, like cardboard, large superficial slabs of concrete or glass or painted sheetrock or plywood create very abstract forms at the macroscopic level. But they have no soul because they have no fine structure at all.

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